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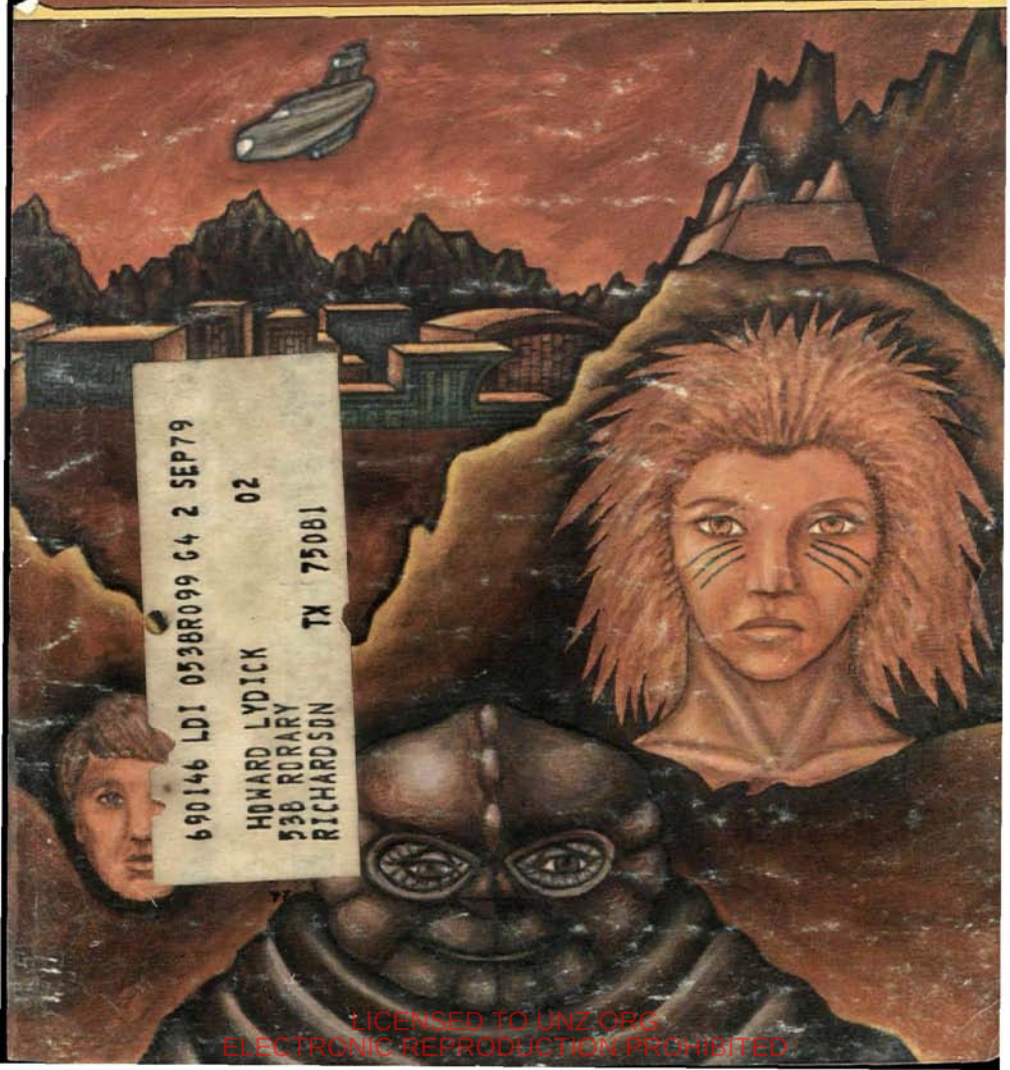

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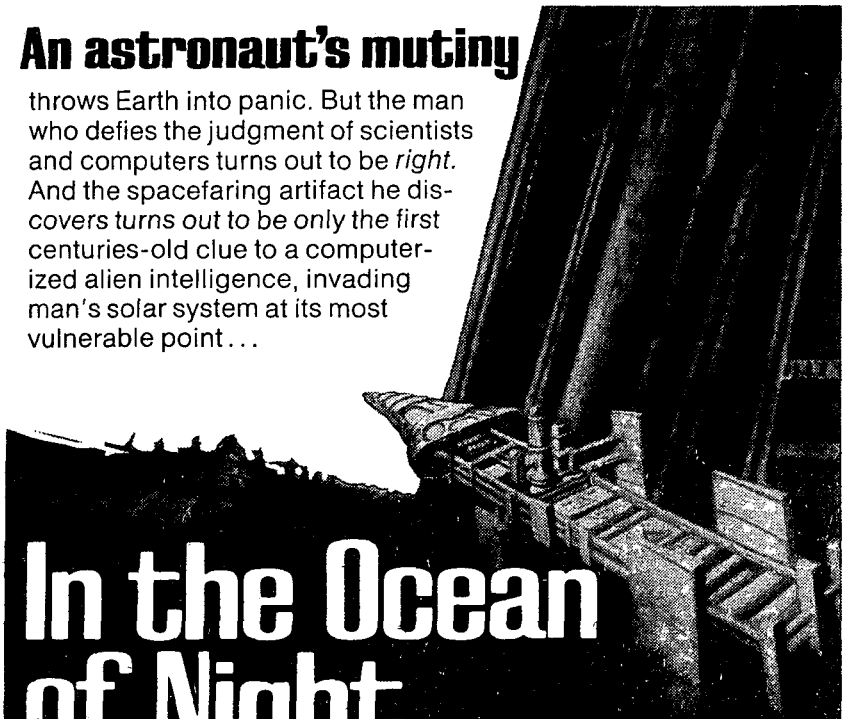

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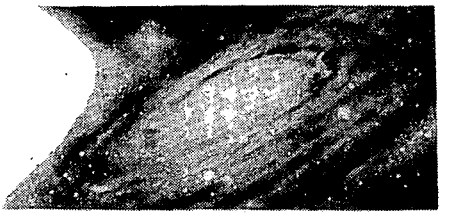
Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION
February 1978
Volume 39, No. 2



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Cover by Amy Harlib from
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Interior illustrations by Woods, Valenza, Harlib, Mueller

GALAXY, Incorporating *Worlds of IF*, February 1978, Vol. 39, No. 2. Published by UPD Publishing Corporation, a subsidiary of Universal Publishing & Distributing Corporation. Main offices and editorial office: 720 White Plains Road, Scarsdale, N.Y., 10583. Single copy $1.25. Annual subscription $15.00 in U.S., $18.00 elsewhere.

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IMAGINATION AND EVOLUTION

"I remember well how the thought struck me of making calculations for rockets. I think the first seeds were sown by the imaginative tales of Jules Verne, which assailed my mind. I was assailed by a sense of longing, and this set me to thinking in a specific way."

—Konstantin Tsiolkovsky

YOU'VE HEARD IT ALL before. Even if you've never read that particular quotation, you know that science fiction has influenced the course of human events. Most of you were watching when men finally landed on the Moon, and television interviewers sought out Robert A. Heinlein and Arthur C. Clarke for reactions to the realization of their dreams.

You don't have to take a college course to know that sf has had its impact on modern man in subtler ways as well. Words—and *concepts*—like "robot" originated in science fiction. "Brave New World" has become a catchphrase with connotations known around the world. And 1984 has become a date to be feared.

Science fiction has contributed not merely to *events*—the space program being the most obvious—but to *attitudes*. And its influence on attitudes—the way people think and feel about the future—is ultimately more important than its relation to concrete events.

For years, science fiction writers have denied they are in the business of "predicting" the future. And indeed, even the greatest of them—like H. G. Wells—have sometimes proven poor prophets (Yes, he *did* predict the atomic bomb in 1914, but that inspiration was exceptional even for him).

For almost as many years, many of the same writers haven't always agreed on what business they *are* in.

Some have claimed to simply be writing entertainment (which doesn't explain why they don't stick to westerns or detective stories). Others have claimed to be writing Literature (which doesn't explain why they don't stick to contemporary fiction). Still others speak seriously of exploring alternative futures—and they speak the truth, but not the *entire* truth.

Science fiction, as you all know, is being taken a great deal more seriously these days. It is a phenomenon at once exciting and depressing. On the one hand, scholars and critics have come to realize that sf is *not* garbage: That it can be serious literature with serious themes. On the other, some of the

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same scholars and critics have little insight into the literature they take so seriously, pigeonholing it into categories they are familiar with, emtombing the real intellectual excitement of science fiction in academic prose as deadly as that of dissertations in any other field.

"Mythology" became a catchword in much sf criticism beginning in the 1960's. Usually, it referred to the use (deliberately or otherwise) of figures, symbols and archetypes from classical mythologies. And, of course, many sf writers have played with such elements: Roger Zelazny transported the Hintu pantheon to another planet in *Lord of Light* (but note that said pantheon had an actual *function*, related to the sociological and ethical themes of the novel).

Less emphasis has usually been given to science fiction's role in creating new mythologies. Donald A. Wollheim, now editor of DAW Books, devoted considerable attention to it in *The Universe Makers*—not a scholarly book, and filled with idiosyncracies, but still interesting.

Science fiction isn't the first literature to create a mythology. C.S. Lewis' *The Allegory of Love* explored the origin and development of the mythology of romantic love in literature. James Fenimore Cooper has attracted renewed interest in recent times because, whatever his crudities as a novelist, he created the mythology of the American frontier.

But science fiction's potential in this area is far greater than that of any previous literature. All mythologies are poetic expressions of what their creators have believed to be the essential relationships of men with each other, and with nature as a whole. Whether classical Greek, or Hindu, or Christian, they have tried to answer the questions: who are we? Why are we?

In science fiction, we ask ourselves who we are and where we are and why we are in relation to a universe seemingly without limits. The last few centuries have been full of discoveries, but those with the most profound impact on the human imagination have been the Discovery of Time and the Discovery of Space.

Many of the greatest works of science fiction have been part of the imaginative response to these discoveries. H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* isn't so much a story about a time machine as one about Time. The classic space operas of E.E. "Doc" Smith and the early John W. Campbell weren't only about spaceships and space battles, but about the vastness of Space itself.

Olaf Stapledon, in the immense mythologies of *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker* sought to define the significance of man, and of any intelligence, in the new Cosmos revealed by science. And he was not the last, nor even the first, to use science fiction to such ends.

One could read the early science fiction of Wells, for example, as the struggle to create a new mythology from science to replace the old one of religion. *The Island of Dr. Moreau* is as much an allegory about the failure of revealed religion as about the beast in man, while *The Food of the Gods* tries to find the purpose of mankind as participa-

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tion in evolution (an idea since taken up not only by other sf writers, but by philosophers like Julian Huxley and Teilhard deChardin).

And much of the literary history of science fiction is one of contending world-views and mythologies. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and the Orwell's *1984* were implicit attacks on the philosophy of Wells as well as explicit attacks on the evils of utilitarian materialism and totalitarianism. Clarke embraced the ideas of Wells and Stapledon in *The City and the Stars* and *Childhood's End;* Lewis attacked both in his *Ransom* trilogy (especially *That Hideous Strength*).

One can contrast the harsh mythology of Algis Budrys' *Rogue Moon*, in which man is pitted against a universe entirely mechanistic and uncaring, with that of Clifford D. Simak in *Way Station*, in which there is a Purpose behind the universe, albeit not necessarily a personal God in the old Judeo-Christian sense. One can read attempts at a new synthesis into the works of Cordwainer Smith and Ursula K. LeGuin, which strive to reconcile the human values of Christianity and Taoism with those of science and evolution.

Science fiction has transformed older mythologies as well. The myth of utopia goes back to ancient times—and was strong enough to give birth to modern Communism. When that turned sour, sf created the anti-utopian mythology of such classics as Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. Yet it has also created vivid utopian alternatives as LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*—not to mention such convergent ideas as her Ekumen and Poul Anderson's Commonalty.

Science fiction has been called a literature of ideas for so long that the phrase has become hackneyed. What we usually mean by the phrase is the concrete idea content of sf: the imaginative play with faster-than-light drives, neutron stars and black holes, alien worlds and psychologies (of which C.J. Cherryh offers brilliant examples in *The Faded Sun: Kesrith*, beginning this month).

But science fiction is also a literature of *general* ideas, even of philosophical ideas—perhaps the only form of such literature still in existence. When one thinks of the philosophical novel, one tends to think of weighty volumes about sensitive intellectuals holding discussions on a mountain top, or Hermann Hesse heroes in quest of spiritual identity. These are expressions of the universal in humanity. And yet we now realize that humanity itself is part of a vast and mysterious universe—and almost certainly not alone in that universe. Surely any serious philosophical literature must consider the place of mankind in that larger universe.

Taking science fiction this seriously has its hazards, of course. Sturgeon's Law applies as severely to "philosophical" sf as to any other kind—perhaps more so: there is nothing duller than a failed philosophy or a stillborn mythology in sf. Like any other elements in science fiction, its mythologies and philosophies must come naturally—as part of our genre's natural interest in the future of man in the universe.

—j.j.p.

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AN ADVENTURE TO THE STARS

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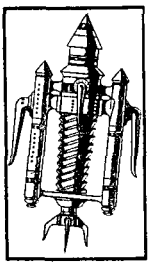
To Buck Rogers...



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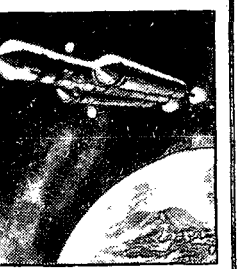

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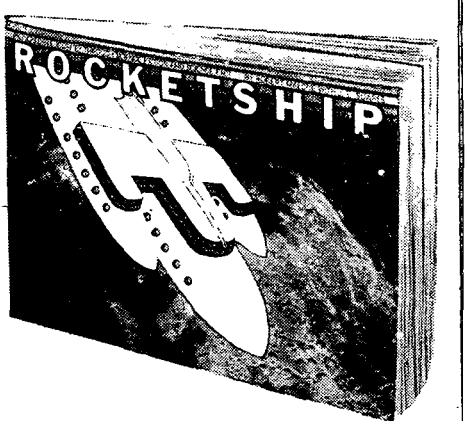

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Personal death is hard enough to face. What then, when one fears his entire kind is dying?

I

Wind-child, sun-child, what is Kath?
Child-bearers, laugh-bringers. that is Kath.

IT WAS A GAME, *shon'ai,* the passing-game, Kel-style, in the dim round hall of the Kel, the middle tower of the house—black-robed men and a black-robed woman, a circle of ten. Warriors, they played the round not like children, with a pair of stones, but with the spinning blades of the *as-ei,* which could wound, or kill. On the name-beat, the snap of fingers, the *as-ei* flew across the seated circle of players and skilled hands seized the hilts in mid-turn, to beat the time and hurl the blades on in the next name-beat.

Fire-child, star-child, what is Kel?
Sword-bearers, song-weavers, that is Kel.

They played without words, with only the rhythm of their hands and the weapons, flesh and steel. The rhythm was as old as time and as familiar as childhood. The game had more meaning than the act, more than the simplicity implied by the words. The Game of the People, it was called.

Dawn-child, earth-child, what is Sen?
Rune-makers, home-leaders, that is Sen.

A kel'en who flinched, whose eye failed or whose wits wandered, had no value in the House. The boys and girls and women of the Kath played with stones, to learn their skill. Those who became kel'ein played thereafter with edged steel. The Kel, like the mothers and children of the gentle Kath, laughed as they played. They of Kel-caste were brief and bright as moths. They enjoyed life because they knew this.

Then-child, now-child, what are we?
Dream-seekers, life-bearers, we are—

A door opened, echoing, the sound rolling through the hollows and depths of the tower. Sen Sathell broke in upon them, suddenly and without warning or courtesies.

The rhythm ceased. The blades rested in the hands of Niun, the youngest kel'en. The Kel as a whole inclined their heads in respect to Sathell s'Delas, chief of Sen-caste, the scholars. Gold-robed he was, like light breaking into the dark hall of the martial Kel, and he was very old—the oldest man of all in the House.

"Kel'anth," he said quietly, addressing Eddan, his counterpart in the Kel, "kel'ein, news has come. The rumor is that the war has ended. The regul have asked the humans for peace."

There was utter silence.

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Then an abrupt move. The *as-ei* whirred and buried points in the painted plaster of the far wall.

The youngest kel'en rose and veiled himself, and stalked from the gathering, leaving shock in his wake.

The sen'anth and the kel'anth looked at each other, old men and kinsmen, helpless in their distress.

And from the deepest shadows one of the dusei—a brown, slope-shouldered mass larger than a man—stirred and rose, ambling forth into the light in that mournful, abstracted manner of dusei. It pushed its way irreverently between the two elders, thrusting its massive head at the kel'anth, who was its master, seeking comfort.

Kel'anth Eddan patted the beast with age-smooth fingers and looked up at the old scholar who, outside the divisions of caste and duty, was his half-brother.

"Is the news beyond any doubt?" he asked, the least trace of hope yet in his voice.

"Yes. The source is regul official communications, no city rumor. It seems completely reliable." Sathell gathered his robes about him and, tucking them between his knees, settled on the carpeted floor among the kel'ein, who eased aside to make room for him in their circle.

They were, these ten, the elders of the House, save one.

They were mri.

In their tongue, when they so named themselves, they were merely saying that they were of the People. Their word for other species was tsi'mri, which meant not-people, and summed up mri philosophy, religion and the personal attitudes of the elders at once.

They were, as a species, golden-toned. Mri legends said that the People were born of the sun. Skin, eyes, coarse shoulder-length manes, all were bronze or gold. Their hands and feet were narrow and long and they were a tall, slender race. Their senses, even in great age, were very keen, their hearing in particular most sensitive. Their golden eyes were lid-folded, double-lidded as well, for a nictitating membrane acted on reflex to protect their vision against blowing dust.

They were, as outsiders believed, a species of warriors of mercenaries—for outsiders saw the Kel, rarely the Sen and never the Kath. Mri served outsiders for hire—served the regul, the massive tsi'mri merchants native to Nurag of the star Mab. For many centuries mri kel'ein had hired out to protect regul commerce between-worlds, generally hired by one regul company as defense against the ambitions and ruthlessness of a business rival, and mri had therefore fought against mri.

Those years and that service had been good for the People, allowing this trying of one kel'en of a certain service against the kel'en of another in proper and traditional combat, as it had always been. Such trials-at-arms refined the strength of the People, eliminating the weak and unfit and giving honor to the strong. In those days the tsi'mri regul had recognized themselves to be incapable of fighting and unskilled in planning strategies, and sensibly left all matters of conflict to the mri Kel to settle in the mri fashion.

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But for the last forty years mri had served all regul combined against all humans in a bitter and ugly conflict, lacking honor and empty of any satisfactions from the enemy. The mri elders were old enough to remember the life before, and knew therefore what changes had been wrought by the war. They were not pleased with them. Humans were mass-fighters, animals of the herd, and understood no other way of war. Mri, who fought singly, had early suspected this, tested it with their lives, found it bitterly true. Humans rejected *a'ani,* honorable combat, would not respect challenge, understood nothing but their own way, which was widespread destruction.

Mri had bent themselves to learn humanity, the way of the enemy, and had begun to adjust their operations and their manner of service to the regul accordingly. Mri were professionals when it came to combat. Innovation in the yin'ein, the ancient weapons that were used in *a'ani,* was dishonorable and unthinkable; but innovation in the za-hen'ein, in modern arms, was a simple matter of retooling and adjusting methods, a matter of competency in the profession they followed for a livelihood.

Regul, unfortunately, were not as capable of adapting to new tactics. Regul had vast and accurate memories. They could not forget what had always occurred, but, conversely, they could hardly conceive of what had not yet happened, nor make plans against it happening. Hitherto the regul had depended on mri entirely in the matter of their personal safety, and mri foresight—for mri could imagine—had shielded them and compensated for that regul blindness to the unexpected; but in later days, when the war began to take regul lives and threaten regul properties, regul took matters into their own unskilled hands. Regul issued orders, prudent in their own estimation, for actions that were militarily impossible.

The mri had attempted to obey, for honor's sake.

Mri had died in their thousands, for honor's sake.

In the House, on this world, there lived only thirteen mri. Two were young. The rest were the makers of policy, a council of the old, the veterans. Long centuries ago the House had numbered more than two thousand in the Kel alone. In this present age all but these few had gone their way to the war, to die.

And their war had been lost, by regul, who had asked the humans for peace.

Sathell looked about him and considered these old ones, kel'ein who had lived beyond their own years of service, whose memories gave them in some matters the perspective of sen'ein. They were Husbands to the she'pan, masters-of-arms while there had been Kath-children to teach. And there was Pasev, the only surviving kel'e'en of the House, she most skilled in yin'ein, next only to Eddan himself. There were Dahacha and Sirain of Nisren; Palazi and Quaras and Lieth of Guragen, itself a dead House, taking refuge with the Mother of this one and adopted by her as Husbands. And from yet another dead House were Liran and Debas, true-brothers. They were part of an age

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that had already vanished, a time the People would not see again.

Sathell felt their sadness, sensed it reflected in the beasts that huddled together in the shadows. Eddan's dus, whose species was reputedly never friendly with any caste but the warrior Kel, sniffed critically at the scholar's gold robes and suffered himself to be touched, then heaved his great bulk a little closer, wrinkled rolls of down-furred flesh, shamelessly accepting affection where it was offered.

"Eddan," said Sathell, stroking the beast's warm shoulder, "I must tell you also: It is very likely the masters will cede this world if the humans should demand it as part of the peace."

"That would be," said Eddan, "a very large settlement."

"Not according to what we have just heard. It is rumored that the humans have secured the whole front, that the regul lords are in complete withdrawal, that the humans are in such a position now that they can touch all the contested areas. They have taken Elag."

There was silence. Elsewhere in the tower a door closed. At last Eddan shrugged, a move of his slender fingers.

"Then the humans will surely demand this world. There is very little they will miss in their desire for revenge. And the regul have left us open to it."

"It is incredible," said Pasev. "Gods! there was no need, no need at all, for the regul to have abandoned Elag. The People could have held there—could have turned the humans had they been given the equipment."

Sathell made a helpless gesture. "Perhaps. But held for whom? The regul withdrew, took everything that was needed there for the defense, pulled ships from under their control. Now we—Kesrith—have become the border. You are right. It is very likely that the regul will not resist here either; in fact, it is not reasonable for them to do so. So we have done all that we could do. We have advised, we have warned—and if our employers refused to take that advice, there is little we can do but cover their retreat, since we cannot restrain them from it. They took the war into their own management against our advice. Now they have lost their war; we have not. The war ceased to be ours some years ago. You are guiltless, kel'ein. You may justly reckon so. There is simply nothing further that can be done."

"There was something once that might have been done," Pasev insisted.

"The Sen attempted many times to reason with the masters. We offered our services and our advice according to the ancient treaty. We could not—" Sathell heard the footsteps of the youth downstairs as he spoke and the disturbance disrupted his train of thought. He glanced hallward involuntarily as the door downstairs slammed with great violence. The sound echoed throughout all the House. He cast the Kel a look of distress.

"Should not one of you at least go speak with him?"

Eddan shrugged, embarrassed in his authority. Sathell knew it. He presumed on kinship and friendship and stepped far out of bounds with Eddan when he made that protest.

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He loved Niun; they all did. But the autonomy of the Kel, even misguided, was sacred regarding the discipline of its members. Only the Mother could interfere within Eddan's province.

"Niun has some small cause, do you not think?" asked Eddan quietly. "He has trained all his life toward this war. He is not a child of the old way, as we are; and now he cannot enter into the new either. You have taken something from him. What do you expect him to do, sen Sathell?"

Sathell bowed his head, unable to dispute with Eddan in the matter, recognizing the truth in Eddan's words, trying to see things as a young kel'en might see them. One could not explain to the Kel, could not refute them in debate or expect foresight of them: children of a day, the kel'ein, brief and passionate, without yesterday and without tomorrow. Their ignorance was the price they paid for their freedom to leave the House and go among tsi'mri; and they knew their place. If a sen'en challenged them to reason, they must simply bow the head in their turn and retreat into silence; they had nothing with which to answer. And to destroy their peace of mind was unconscionable. Knowledge without power was the most bitter condition of all.

"I think I have told you," said Sathell at last, "all that I know to tell you at the moment. I will advise you immediately if there is any further news."

He arose in the silence and smoothed his robes into order, gingerly avoiding the reflexive grasp of the dus. The beast reached at his ankle, harmless in intent but not in potential. The dusei were not to be treated with familiarity by any but a kel'en. He stopped and looked at Eddan, who with a touch rebuked the beast and freed the sen'anth.

Sathell edged round the massive paw and cast a final look at Eddan, but Eddan looked away, affecting not to be interested any further in his departure. Sathell was not willing to press the matter publicly. He knew his half-brother and knew that the hurt was precisely because there was affection between them. There was a careful line drawn between them in public. When caste divided kinsmen, there had to be, to save the pride of the lesser.

He gave a formal courtesy to the others and withdrew. He was glad to be out of that grim hall, heavy as the air was with the angers of frustrated men, and of the dusei, whose rage was slower but more violent. He was relieved, nonetheless, that they had listened to all that he had said. There would be no violence, no irrational action, which was the worst thing to be feared from the Kel. They were old. The old might reason together in groups, might consult together. The kel'en was, in youth, a solitary warrior and reckless, and without perspective.

He thought of going after Niun but did not know what to say to him should he find him. His duty was to report elsewhere.

* * *

When the door closed, aged Pasev, kel'e'en, veteran of Nisren and Elag's first taking, pulled the *as-ei* from the shattered plaster and

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merely shrugged off the sen'anth. She had seen more years and more of war than any living warrior but Eddan himself. She played the game all the same, as did they all, including Eddan. It was a death as honorable as one in war.

"Let us play it out," she said.

"No," said Eddan firmly. "No. Not yet."

He caught her eyes as he spoke. She looked at him plainly, aged lover, aged rival, aged friend. Her slim fingers brushed the fine edge of the steel but she understood the order.

"Aye," she said, and the *as-ei* spun past Eddan's shoulder to bury themselves in the painted map of Kesrith that decorated the east wall.

* * *

"The Kel bore the news," said sen Sathell, "with more restraint than I expected of them. But it was not welcome all the same. They feel cheated. They perceive it as an affront to their honor. And Niun left. He would not even hear it out. I do not know where he went. I am concerned."

She'pan Intel, the Lady Mother of the House and of the People, leaned back in her many cushions, ignoring a twinge of pain. The pain was an old companion. She had had it for forty-three years, since she lost her strength and her beauty at once in the fires of burning Nisren. Even then she had not been young. Even then she had been she'pan of homeworld, ruler over all three castes of the People. She was of the first rank of the Sen, surpassing Sathell himself; she was above other she'panei as well, the few that still lived. She knew the Mysteries that were closed to others; she knew the name and nature of the Holy and of the Gods. The Pana, the Revered Objects, were in her keeping. She knew her nation to its depth and its width, its birth and its destiny.

She was she'pan of a dying House, eldest Mother of a dying species. The Kath, the caste of child-bearers and children, was dead, its tower dark and closed twelve years ago. The last of the kath'ein was long buried in the cliffs of Sil'athen and the last children, motherless save for herself, had gone to their destinies outside. Her Kel had declined to ten, and the Sen. . . .

The Sen was before her: Sathell, the eldest, the sen'anth, whose weak heart ever poised him a beat removed from the Dark; and the girl who sat presently at her feet. They were the gold robes, the light-bearers, high-caste. Her own robes were white, untainted by the edgings of black and blue and gold worn by the she'panei of lesser degree. Their knowledge was almost complete but her own was entire. If her own heart should stop beating this moment, so much, so incalculably much, could be lost to the People. It was a fearful thing to consider how much rested on her every pulse and breath.

That the House and the People not die.

The girl Melein looked up at her—last of all the children, Melein s'Intel Zain-Abrin, who had once been kel'e'en. At times the kel-fierceness still dwelt in Melein—although she had outwardly as-

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sumed the robes and the chaste serenity of the scholarly Sen, although the years had given her different skills and her mind had advanced far beyond the simplicity of a kel'e'en.

Intel brushed at Melein's shoulder, a faint caress. "Patience," she advised, seeing Melein's anxiety, and she knew that the advice would be discarded in all respects.

"Let me go find Niun and talk to him," Melein asked.

Brother and sister, Niun and Melein—and close, despite that they had been separated by law and she'pan's decree and caste and custom. Kel'en and sen'e'en, dark and bright, Hand and Mind. But the heart in them was the same, and the blood was the same. Intel remembered the pair that had given them life: her youngest and most beloved Husband and a kel'e'en of Guragen, both lost now. *His* face, *his* eyes, that had made her regret a she'pan's chastity, gazed back at her through Melein's and Niun's; and she remembered that he also had been strong-willed and hot-tempered and clever. Perhaps Melein hated her; she had not willingly received the command to leave the Kel and enter the Sen. But there was no defiance to be seen now, though the she'pan searched for it. There was only anxiety, only a natural grief for her brother's pain.

"No," said Intel sharply. "I tell you to let him alone."

"He may harm himself, she'pan."

"He will not. You underestimate him. He does not need you now. You are no longer of the Kel and I doubt that he wants to be faced by one of the Sen at this moment. What could you tell him? What could you answer if he asked you questions? Could you be silent?"

The words struck home. "He wanted to leave Kesrith six years ago," said Melein, her eyes bright with unshed tears; and possibly it was not only her brother's case she pleaded now, but her own. "You would not let him go. Now it is too late, she'pan. It is forever too late for him, and what can he imagine for himself? What is there left for him?"

"Meditate upon these things," said Intel, "and tell me your conclusions, sen Melein s'Intel, after you have thought a day and a night on this matter. But do not intrude your advice into the private affairs of a kel'en. And do not regard him as your brother. A sen'e'en has no kin but the whole House, and the People."

Melein rose and stared down at her, breast heaving with her struggle for breath. Beautiful, this daughter of hers. Intel saw her in this instant and was amazed at how much Melein, who was not of her blood, had become the things her own youth had once promised—saw mirrored her own self—before Nisren's fall, before the ruin of the House and of her own hopes. The sight wounded her. In this moment she saw clearly, and knew the sen'e'en as she was, and at once feared her and loved her.

Melein, who would hardly mourn her passing.

So she had created her, deliberately, event by event, choice by choice, her daughter-not-of-the-flesh, her child, her Chosen, formed

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in Kath and Kel and Sen, partaker of the Mysteries of all castes of the People.

Hating her.

"Learn restraint," the she'pan earnestly advised in a still, soft voice that thrust with difficulty into Melein's anger. "Learn to be sen'e'en, Melein, above all else that you desire to have."

The young sen'e'en let go a shuddering breath and the tears in her eyes spilled over. Thwarted for now, the sen'e'en was for a moment child again; but this child was dangerous.

Intel shivered, foreknowing that Melein would outlive her and impose her own imprint on the world.

II

There was a division in the world, marked by a causeway of white rock. On the one side, and at the lower end, lay the regul of Kesrith—city folk, slow-moving, long-remembering. The lowland city was entirely theirs: flat sprawling buildings, a port, commerce with the stars, mining that scarred the earth, a plant that extracted water from the Alkaline Sea. The land had been called the Dus-plain before there were regul on Kesrith, the mri remembered. For this reason the mri had avoided the plain, in respect of the dusei; but the regul had insisted to set their city there, and the dusei had left it.

Uplands, in the rugged hills at the other end of the causeway, was the tower of the mri. It appeared as four truncated cones arising from the corners of a trapezoidal ground floor—slanted walls made of the pale earth of the lowlands, treated and hardened. This was the Edun Kesrithun, the House of Kesrith, the home of the mri of Kesrith and, because of Intel, the home of all mri in the wide universe.

One could see most of Kesrithi civilization from the vantage point Niun occupied in his solitary anger. He came here often, to this highest part of the causeway, to this stubborn outcrop of rock that had defeated the regul road and made the regul think otherwise about their plans to extend it into the high hills, invading the sanctity of Sil'athen.

Niun liked it for what it was as well as for the view. Below him lay the regul city and the mri edun, two very small scars on the body of the white earth. Above him, in the hills, and beyond and beyond, there were only regul automatons that drew minerals from the earth and provided regul Kesrith its reason for existence; and wild things that had owned the world before the coming of regul or of mri; and the slow-moving dusei that had once been Kesrith's highest form of life.

Niun sat brooding on the rock that overlooked the world, hating tsi'mri with more than the ordinary hatred of mri for aliens, which was considerable. He was twenty-six years old as the People reckoned years, which was not by Kesrith's orbit around Arain, nor by the standard of Nisren, nor by that of either of the two other worlds the People had designated homeworld in the span of time remembered by Kel songs.

He was tall, even for his kind. His high cheekbones bore the *set'al,* the triple scars of his caste, blue-

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stained and indelible. This meant that he was a full-fledged member of the Kel, the Hand of the People. Being of the Kel, he went robed from collar to boot-tops in unrelieved black; and black veil and tasseled headcloth, *mez* and *zaidhe,* concealed all but his brow and his eyes from the gaze of outsiders when he chose to meet them; and the *zaidhe* further had a dark, transparent visor that could meet the veil when dust blew or red Arain reached its unpleasant zenith.

He was a man: His face, like his thoughts, was considered a private identity, one indecent to reveal to strangers. The veils enveloped him as did the robes, a distinguishing mark of the only caste of the People that might deal with outsiders. The black robes, the *siga,* were held about the waist and chest with belts that bore his weapons, which were several; and they should also have held *j'tai,* medallions, honors won for his services to the People. They held none, and this lack of status would have been obvious to any mri who beheld him.

Being of the Kel, he could neither read nor write, save that he could use a numbered keyboard and he knew mathematics, both regul and mri. He knew by heart the complicated genealogies of his House, which had been that of Nisren. The name-chants filled him with melancholy when he sang them: It could not be otherwise when he must look about the cracking walls of Edun Kesrithun and behold only so few people as now lived and realize that decline was taking place, that it was real and threatening. He knew all the songs. He could foresee begetting no child of his own who would sing them, not on Kesrith. He had learned the songs; he had learned the languages that were part of the Kel-lore. He spoke four languages fluently, two of which were his own, one of which was the regul's, and the fourth of which was the enemy's. He was expert in weapons, both the yin'ein and the zahen'ein; he was taught of nine masters-of-arms; he knew that his skill was great in all these things.

And wasted, all wasted.

Regul.

Tsi'mri.

Niun flung a rock downslope, which splashed into a hot pool and disturbed the vapors.

Peace.

Peace on human terms, it would be. Regul had disregarded mri strategists at every crucial moment of the war. Regul would spend mri lives without stinting and they would pay the bloodprice to edunei that lost sons and daughters of the Kel, all because some regul colonial official panicked and ordered suicidal attack by the handful of mri serving him personally, to cover his retreat and that of his younglings; but far less willingly would that same regul risk regul lives or properties. To lose regul lives would mean loss of status; it would have brought that regul instant censure by regul authorities, recall to homeworld, sifting of his knowledge, death of himself and his young in all probability.

It was inevitable that humans should have realized this essential weakness of the regul-mri partnership, that humans should have

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learned that inflicting casualties on regul would have far more effect than inflicting those same casualties on mri.

It was predictable then that the regul should have panicked under that pressure, that they would have reacted by retreat, precipitous, against all mri counsel to the contrary, exposing world after world to attack in their haste to withdraw to absolute security. Consequently that absolute security could not exist.

And that regul would afterward compound their stupidity by dealing directly with the humans—this too was credible in the regul—to buy and sell war, and to sell out quickly when threatened rather than risk losing overmuch of their necessary possessions.

The regul language contained no word for courage.

Neither had it one for imagination.

The war was ending and Niun remained worldbound, never having put to use the things that he had learned. The Gods knew what manner of trading the merchants were doing, what disposition was being made of his life. He foresaw that things might revert to what they had been before the war, that mri might again serve individual regul—that mri would fight mri again, in combat where experience mattered.

And Gods knew how long it would be possible to find a regul to serve, when the war was ending and conditions were entering a period of flux. Gods knew how likely a regul was to take on an inexperienced kel'en to guard his ship when others, war-wise, were available.

He had trained all his life to fight

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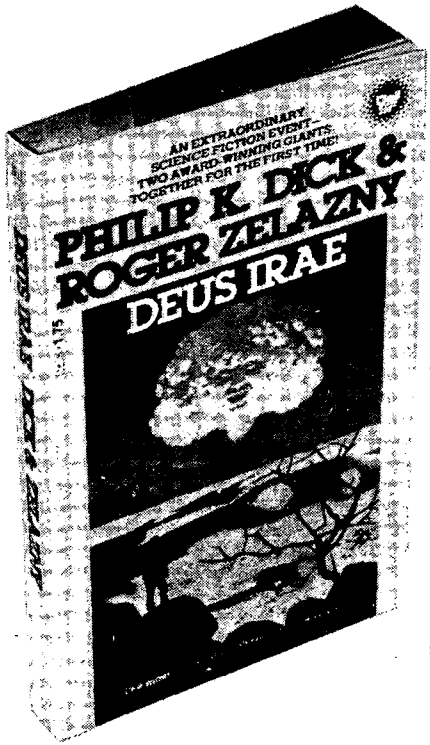

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humans and now the policies of three species conspired to keep him from it.

He rose up of a sudden, mind set on an idea that had been seething within for more than this day alone, and he leaped to the ground and started walking down the road. He did not look back when he had passed the edun, unchallenged, unnoticed. He owned nothing. He needed nothing. What he wore and what he carried as his weapons were his to take; he had these by law and custom, and he could ask nothing more of his edun even were he leaving with its blessing and help, which he was not.

In the edun Melein would surely grieve at such a silent desertion, but she had been kel'e'en herself long enough to be glad for his sake that he went to a service. A kel'en in an edun was as impermanent as the wind itself and ought to own no close ties past childhood, save to the she'pan and to the People and to him or her that hired him.

He did feel a certain guilt toward the she'pan, to her who had mothered him with a closeness much beyond what a she'pan owed a son of her Husbands. He knew that she had particularly favored Zain, his father, and still mourned his death; and she would neither approve nor allow the journey he made now.

It was, in fact, Intel's stubborn, possessive will that had held him this long on Kesrith, kept him at her side long past the years that he decently should have left her authority and that of his teachers. He had once loved Intel, deeply, reverently. Even that love, in the slow years since he should have followed the other kel'ein of the edun and left her, had begun to turn to bitterness.

Thanks to her, his skills were untried, his life unused and now perhaps altogether useless. Nine years had passed since the *seta'al* of the Kel had been cut and stained into his face, nine years that he had sat in heart-pounding longing whenever a regul master would come up the road to the edun and seek a kel'en to guard a ship, be it for the war or even for commerce. Fewer and fewer these requests came in the passing years, and now there came no more requests to the edun at all. He was the last of all his brothers and sisters of the Kel, last of all the children of the edun save Melein. The others had all found their service, and most were dead; but Niun s'Intel, nine years a kel'en, had yet to leave the she'pan's protective embrace.

Mother, let me go! he had begged of her six years ago, when his cousin Medai's ship had left—the ultimate, the crushing, shame that Medai—swaggering, boastful Medai —should be chosen for the greatest honor of all, and he be left behind in disgrace.

No, the she'pan had said in the absolute, invoking her authority; and to his repeated pleading for her understanding, for his freedom: *No. You are the last of all my sons, the last, the last I shall ever have. Zain's child. And if I will you to stay with me, that is my right, and that is my final decision. No. No.*

He had fled to the high hills that day, watching and not wishing to watch as the ship of the regul high command, *Hazan*, which ruled the

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zone in which Kesrith lay, bore Medai s'Intel Sov-Nelan into manhood, into service, into the highest honor that had yet befallen a kel'en of Edun Kesrithun.

That day Niun had wept, though kel'ein could not weep. And then in shame at this weakness, he had scoured his face with the harsh powdery sand and stayed fasting in the hills for another day and two nights, until he had had to come down and face the other kel'ein and the Mother's anxious and possessive love.

Old, all of them. There was not a kel'en now save himself that could take a service even if it were offered. They were all greatly skilled. He suspected that they were the greatest masters of the yin'ein in all the People, although they did not boast anything but considerable competency; but the years had done their subtle robbery and left them no strength to use their arts in war. It was a Kel of eight men and one woman past their reason for living, without strength to fight or—after him—children to teach: old ones whose dreams must now be all backward.

Nine years they had stolen from him, entombing him with them, living their vicarious lives through his youth.

He walked the road down to the lowlands, letting the causeway take him to regul, since regul would not come to the edun in these days. It was not the most direct route but it was the easiest, and he walked it insolently secure since the old ones of the Kel could not possibly overtake him on so long a walk. He did not mean to go to the port, which was directly crosslands, but to what lay at the causeway's end, the very center of regul authority, the Nom, that two-storied building that was the highest structure in Kesrith's only city.

* * *

He felt uneasy when his boots trod concrete and he found all about him the ugly, flat buildings of regul. Here was a different world from the cleanliness of the high hills; even a different smell in the air, a blunting of the acrid flavor of Kesrith's chill winds, a subtle effluvium of oil and machinery and musky regul bodies.

Regul younglings watched him—the mobile ones, the young of regul. Their squat bodies would thicken further in adulthood, their grayish-brown skins darken, loosen; fat would accumulate until they found themselves enveloped in weight almost too great for their atrophying muscles to lift. Mri seldom saw elder regul: Niun himself had never seen an elder in the flesh; only heard them described by his teachers of the Kel. Adult regul kept to their city, surrounded by machines that carried them, that purified their air; they were attended by younglings that must wait on them constantly, who themselves lived precarious lives until they chanced to reach maturity. The only violence regul perpetrated was against their own young.

The younglings on the square looked at him now in sidelong glances and talked in secretive tones that carried to his sensitive hearing, more clearly surely than they re-

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alized possible. Ordinarily this spitefulness would not have troubled him in the least: He had been taught less liking for them and despised them and all their breed. But here he was the petitioner, desperately anxious, and they held what he wanted and had the power to deny it to him. Their hatred breathed about him like the tainted city atmosphere.

He had veiled himself long before he entered the town; but with a little more encouragement, he would have dropped the visor of the *zaidhe* also. He had done so on his last visit to this city, being a very young kel'en and uncertain of the proprieties of conduct between regul and mri. But now, older, a man in his own right, he had the face to leave the visor up and glare back at the younglings who stared too boldly; and most could not bear the direct contact with his eyes and flinched from meeting them. A few, older and braver than the others, hissed soft displeasure, warning. He ignored them. He was not a regul youngling, to fear their violence.

He knew his way. He knew the Nom's proper entrance, fronting the great square around which the city was built in concentric squares. It faced the rising sun, as main entrances of central regul buildings must. He remembered this. He had been here as escort to his father, who was about to take his last service; but he had not been inside. Now he came to the door before which he had waited on that day, and at his presence the regul youngling on duty in the vestibule rose in alarm.

"Go away," said the youngling flatly; but Niun paid no attention to it and walked into the main foyer of the echoing place, at once stifled by the heat and the musky flavor of the air. He found himself in a great area surrounded by doors and windowed offices, all with titles written on them; he was quickly sick and dizzy from the air; and he stood confused and ashamed in the middle of the hall, for here it was a matter of reading to know where he must go next, and he could not read.

It was the regul youngling from the vestibule desk that came to him in his distress, stumping across the floor in short, scuffing steps. The youngling was flushed dark with anger, or with the heat, and breathing heavily from the exertion of overtaking Niun.

"Go away," the youngling repeated. "By treaty and by law, you have no business coming here."

"I will speak to your elders," Niun told the youngling. This, he had been taught, was the ultimate and unanswerable appeal among regul: No youngling could make an ultimate decision. "Tell them that a kel'en is here to speak with them."

The youngling blew air, fluttering, through its nostrils. "Come with me then," it said, and cast him a disapproving glance, a flash of white, red-veined, from the corner of a rolling eye.

It was—it, for regul could not determine their own gender until maturity—like all regul, a squat figure, body almost touching the floor even while it was standing. It was also a very young regul to have been given the (among regul) considerable honor of tending the Nom door. It still bore itself erect, bones

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showing through the skin, the brown pebbly hide fine-grained yet and delicate with beige tones and a casting of metallic highlights, It walked beside him, a rolling gait that needed considerable leeway.

"I am Hada Surag-gi," it said, "secretary, guardian to the door. You are doubtless one of Intel's lot."

Niun did not answer this rudeness on the part of the tsi'mri guard, naming the she'pan by her name with such insolent familiarity. Among regul, elders would be *the reverence,* or *the honorable,* or *the lord*. . .and he reckoned the familiarity for calculated insult, marking it down for a later date, if it so happened he found himself holding what Hada Surag-gi desired. The youngling at present was doing what he wanted it to do and this, between mri and tsi'mri, was sufficient.

Steel tracks ran the bowed edges of the walls, and a vehicle whispered past them at a speed so great the presence was only an instant. The tracks went everywhere on the wall opposite the doors, and another and another vehicle passed, missing one another by a hand's breadth. He did not let himself appear amazed at such things.

And neither did he thank the youngling when it had shown him through a door and into a waiting room where another, seemingly adult, kept a metal desk; he simply turned his back on the youngling when it had ceased to be of use, and heard it leave.

The official leaned back from its desk, cradling its body in the mobile chair that—amazingly—moved under power: another such vehicle, a gleaming steel device such as he had heard the adult regul used to move about without rising.

"We know you," the regul said. "You are Niun, from the Hill. Your elders have contacted us. You are ordered to return to your people immediately."

Heat rushed to his face. Of course they would have done this, forestalling him. He had not even thought of it.

"That does not matter," he said, carefully formal. "I am asking service with your ships. I renounce my edun."

The regul, a brown mass, folded and over-folded, its face a surprising bony smoothness within this weight, sighed and regarded him with small, wrinkle-edged eyes.

"We hear what you say," it said. "But our treaty with your folk does not permit us to accept you with your elders protesting. Please return to them at once. We do not want to quarrel with your elders."

"Do you have a superior?" Niun asked harshly, out of patience and fast losing hope as well. "Let me speak to someone of higher authority."

"You ask to see the Director?"

"Yes."

The regul sighed again and made the request of an intercom. A grating voice refused, flatly. The regul looked up, rolling its eyes in an expression that was more satisfied and smug than apologetic. "You see," it said.

Niun turned on his heel and strode out of the office and out of the foyer, ignoring the amused eyes of the youngling Hada Surag-gi. He felt his face burning, his breath

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short, as he exited the warm interior of the Nom and walked onto the public square, where the cold wind swept through the city.

He walked swiftly as if he had a place to go and went there of his own will. He imagined that every regul on the street knew his shame and was laughing secretly. This was not beyond all possibility, for regul tended to know everyone's business.

He did not slow his pace until he was walking the long causeway back from the city's edge toward the edun, and then indeed he walked slowly and cared little for what passed his eyes or his hearing on the road. The open land, even on the causeway, was not a place where it was safe to go inattentive to surroundings, but he did so, tempting the Gods and the she'pan's anger. He was sorry that nothing did befall him and that, after all, he found himself walking the familiar earthen track to the entrance of the edun and entering its shadows and its echoes. He was sullen still as he walked to the stairs of the Kel tower and ascended, pushing open the door of the hall, reporting to kel'anth Eddan, dutiful prisoner.

"I am back," he said, and did not unveil.

Eddan had the rank and the self-righteousness to turn a naked face to his anger, and the self-possession to remain unstirred.

Old man, old man, Niun could not help thinking, *the seta'al are one with the wrinkles on your face, and your eyes are dimmed so that they already look into the Dark. You will keep me here until I am like you. Nine years, nine years, Eddan, and you have made me lose my dignity. What can you take from me in nine more?*

"You are back," echoed Eddan, who had been his principal teacher-in-arms and who adopted that master-student manner with him. "What of it?"

Niun carefully unveiled, settled crosslegged to the floor near the warmth of the dus that slept in the corner. It eased aside, murmured a rumbling complaint at the disturbance of its sleep.

"I would have gone," he said.

"You distressed the she'pan," Eddan said. "You will not go down to the city again. She forbids it."

Niun looked up, outraged.

"You embarrassed the House," Eddan said. "Consider that."

"Consider *me*!" Niun exclaimed, exhausted. He saw the shock his outburst created in Eddan and cast the words out in reckless satisfaction: "It is unnatural, what you have done, keeping me here. I am due something in my life—something of my own, at least."

"Are you?" Eddan's soft voice was edged. "Who taught you that? Some regul in the city?"

Eddan stood still, hands within his belt, old master of the yin'ein, in that posture that chilled a man who knew its meaning: *Here is challenge, if you want it.* Niun loved Eddan. That Eddan looked at him in this way frightened him; made him reckon his skill against Eddan's; made him remember that Eddan could still humble him. There was a difference between himself and the old master, that if Eddan's bluff were called, blood would flow for it. And Eddan knew

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that difference in them. Heat rose to Niun's face.

"I never asked to be treated differently than all the others," he declared, averting his face from Eddan's challenge.

"What do you think you are due?" Eddan asked him.

He could not answer.

"You have a soft spot in your defense," said Eddan. "A gaping hole. Go and consider that, Niun s'Intel, and when you have made up your mind what it is the People owe you, come and tell me and we will go to the Mother and present your case to her."

Eddan mocked him. The bitter thing was that he deserved it. He saw that this over-anxiousness was what had shamed him before the regul. He resumed the veil and gathered himself to his feet.

"You have duties that are waiting," Eddan said sharply. "Dinner was held without you. Go and assist Liran at cleaning up. Tend to your own obligations before you consider what is owed to you."

"Sir," Niun said quietly, averted his face again and went his way below.

III

The ship, a long voyage out from Elag/Haven, had shifted to the tedium that had possessed it before transition. Sten Duncan took a second look at the mainroom display and was disappointed to discover it had not yet noted the change. They had spent the longest normal-space passage he had ever endured getting out of Haven's militarily sensitive vicinity, blind and under tedious escort. That was suddenly gone. It was replaced by another passage likely as tedious. He shrugged and kept walking. The place smelled of regul. He held his breath as he passed the galley-automat, the door of which was open. He kept to the center of the corridor, scarcely noticing as a sled whisked past him. The corridors were built wide, high in the center and low on the sides, with gleaming rails recessed into the flooring to guide the conveyance sleds that carried the regul about the long corridors of their ship.

It was not possible to forget for an instant that this ship was regul. The corridors did not angle or bow as they would in a human-made vessel; they wound, spiraled, amenable to the gliding course of the sleds that hugged the walls, and only a few of them could be walked. In those designed for walking, there was headroom in their center for humans—or for mri, who were the ordinary tenants of regul ships—but tracks ran the sides for regul.

And about the whole ship there were strange scents, strange aromas of unpalatable food and spices, strange sounds, the rumbling tones of regul language that neither humans nor probably even mri had ever pronounced as regul might.

He loathed it. He loathed the regul utterly, and knowing that that reaction was neither wise nor helpful in his position, he constantly fought against his instincts. It was clear enough that the reaction was mutual with the regul; they restricted their human guests to six hours in which they were supposedly free to roam the personnel

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areas to their hearts' content; and after that came a twenty-two-hour period of confinement.

Sten Duncan, aide to the Honorable George Stavros—governor-to-be in the new territories and presently liaison between regul and humanity—regularly availed himself of that six-hour liberty; the Honorable Mr. Stavros did not. He did not, in fact, venture from his own room. Duncan walked the corridors and gathered the appropriate materials and releases from the library for the honorable gentleman to read and carried to the pneumatic dispatch whatever communications flowed from Stavros to Stavros' regul counterpart, bai Hulagh Alagn-ni.

Regul protocol. No regul elder of dignity performed his own errands—only a condemned incompetent lacked youngling servitors. Therefore no human of Stavros' rank would do so; and therefore Stavros had chosen an aide of apparent youth and fairly advanced rank, criteria that regul would use in selecting their own personal attendants.

He was, in effect, a servant. He provided Stavros a certain prestige. He ran errands. Back in the action that had taken Haven, he had held military rank. The regul knew this, which further enhanced Stavros' prestige.

Duncan gathered up the day's communications, left others from Stavros on the appropriate table and delivered the food order to the slot that ultimately would find its way to the correct department, sending an automated carrier to their door with the requested meal—at least as regul construed it—of the human-supplied foodstuffs that had come with them.

Like exotic pets, Duncan reflected with annoyance, with the regul trying, as far as convenient, to maintain an authentic environment. As in most wild-animal displays, the staging was transparently artificial.

He retraced his way down the hall, through the mainroom recreation area and library. He had never set eyes on any of the regul save the younglings that frequented this central personnel relaxation area. Curiously enough, neither had Stavros encountered Hulagh. Protocol again. It was likely that, in all the time they had yet to spend among regul, they would never meet the Honorable, the Reverence, bai Hulagh Alagn-ni, but only the younglings that served him as crew and aides and messengers.

Regul elders were virtually immobile; this was certain; and Hulagh was said to be of very extreme age. Duncan privately surmised that this helplessness was a source of embarrassment to the elderly regul in dealing face to face with non-regul and that therefore they arranged to keep themselves in total seclusion from outsiders.

Or perhaps they judged humans and mri unbearably ugly. It was certain that there was little that humans could find beautiful in the regul.

He opened the unlocked door that let him into the double suite he shared with Stavros. The anteroom was his, serving as sleeping quarters and all else he was supposed to desire during the long passage: regul revenge, he thought sourly, for

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human insistence on the long, slow escort. Both the reception salon and proper bedroom belonged to Stavros. So did the sanitary facilities, which were in the adjoining bedroom and likewise not designed for human comfort: He wondered how Stavros, elderly as he was, coped with that. But it had not been deemed wise to make an issue of regul-human differences even in that detail. The theory was that the regul were *honoring* their guests by treating them precisely as if they were regul, down to the tradition of dealing only through youngling intermediaries and the tradition that placed Duncan's quarters uncomfortably in the tiny anteroom between Stavros and the outer corridor.

Precious encouragement for confidence in regul civilization, Duncan thought sourly, when he thought about it; he was to defend the honorable human gentleman from harm, from contact with rude outsiders, from all unpleasantness. It seemed no insult to regul hospitality to assume that such rudenesses might be anticipated.

And Stavros remained a virtual prisoner of his exalted rank, pent within one room, with no contact with the outside save himself.

Duncan sealed the outer door and knocked on the inner, a formality preserved necessarily—first, because listening regul (assuming regul listened, which he and Stavros firmly believed) would not understand any informality between elder and youngling; and second, because they had been at close quarters too long and cherished what privacy each could obtain.

The door opened, controlled by Stavros' remote devices. It was incongruous to see a human, especially a frail and slight one, sitting in the massive chair-sled designed for regul elders. Desk, control center, mode of transportation: Stavros disdained to propel it across the room. Duncan went to him, presented the tapes and papers and Stavros took them from him and began to deal with them at once, all without a smile or word of greeting or even a dismissal. Stavros had smiled a few times at the beginning of their association; he did not now. They lived under the continual witness of the regul. Duncan was treated, he suspected, as if he were in truth a regul youngling, without courtesy and without consideration of himself as an individual. He hoped, at least, that this was the source of Stavros' coldness to him.

He knew that he was far from understanding such a man. He saw some qualities in Stavros that he respected: courage, for one. He thought that it must have taken a great deal of that to enter on such a mission at Stavros' age. An elderly human had been wanted, a diplomat who, aside from his duties as administrator of the new territories, could obtain greater respect from the regul that would be neighbors to humanity. Stavros had come out of retirement to take the assignment —not a strong man, nor an imposing one physically. He was, Duncan had learned in their only intimate conversation—and that before boarding—a native of Kiluwa, one of the several casualties of the war in its earliest years; and that might explain something.

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Kiluwans were legendarily eccentric, of a fringe-area colony left too long on its own, peculiar in religion, in philosophy, in manners: like the regul, they had not believed in writing. For the years after Kiluwa's fall, Stavros had been in the XenBureau; of late retired to university life. He had children, had lost a grandson to the war at Haven/Elag. If Stavros hated regul either for Kiluwa or for the grandson's sake, he had never betrayed it. He seldom betrayed any emotion beyond a certain obsessive interest in the regul. Everything in Stavros was quiet, and there were depths and depths beneath that placidity.

Suddenly the old man's pale eyes flashed up. "Good morning, Duncan," he said and instantly returned to his studies. "Sit," he added. "Wait."

Duncan sat down, disappointed, and waited. He had nothing else to do. He would have gone mad already had he not had the ability to bear long silence and inactivity. He watched Stavros work, wondering again why the old man had so determined to learn the regul tongue, a task that occupied his many hours. There were regul who spoke perfectly idiomatic Basic. There always would be. But Stavros had succeeded well enough on their voyage that now he could listen to the tape from the regul master of the ship, outlining the day's schedules and providing information, and need glance only occasionally at the supplied written translation—regul propaganda, praising the elders of homeworld, Nurag, praising the correct management of the director of the ship. Duncan found it all very dry, save for the small hints of the progress the ship was making.

But from such things Stavros learned, and he became fluent at least in trivial courtesies—learned at a rate that began to amaze Duncan. The old man could actually understand that confusion of sound, which remained only confusion to Duncan.

Such a man, a scholar, an intelligent man, with grandchildren and great-grandchildren, had left everything human and familiar, everything his long life had produced, and now took a voyage with the enemy, into unknown space. Although a governorship was a considerable inducement, the hazards for Stavros were more than considerable. Duncan did not know how old the man was; there had been rumors at Haven verging on the incredible. He did know that one of the great-grandchildren was entering the military.

If Duncan had enjoyed any intimacy with Stavros, he would have been moved to ask him why he had come; he dared not. But every time he was tempted to give way to the pressures of their confinement, of his own fear of the strangeness about them, he thought of the old man patiently at his lessons and resigned himself to last it out.

He did not think that he contributed anything to Stavros, be it companionship or service, only the necessary appearance of propriety in the regul's eyes. Stavros could have done without him, for all the notice he paid him. Personnel had chosen half a dozen men for interview and he, one of the Surface Tactical

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officers at Haven, had been the choice. He still did not know why. He had admitted to his lack of qualifications for such a post. *Then he'll know that he has to take orders,* Stavros had concluded in his presence. *Volunteer?* Stavros had asked him then, as if this were a point of suspected insanity. *No, sir,* he had answered—the truth: *They called in every SurTac in the Haven reach. Pilot's rating?* Stavros had asked. *Yes,* he had said. *Hold any grudge against the regul?* Stavros asked. *No,* he had answered simply, which was again the truth: He did not like them, but it was not a grudge, it was war; it was all he knew. And Stavros had read his record a second time in his presence and accepted him.

It had sounded good at the time, fantastically desirable. From a war where life expectancy was rated in missions flown, and where he was reaching his statistical limit, to an easy berth on a diplomatic flight under escort, with guaranteed retirement home and discharge in five years; discharge at less than thirty on a pension larger than any SurTac could reasonably dream of or—and this was the thing that Duncan pondered with the most interest—permanent attachment to a new colonial directorate, permanent assignment to Stavros' territories, wealth and prominence on a developing world. . .it was a prize for which men would kill or die. He had only to endure regul company for a while in either case and to win Stavros' approval by his service. He had five years to accomplish the latter. He meant to do it.

He had not been much frightened when he stepped aboard the regul ship. He had read all the data known on the regul and knew them as non-combative, non-violent by preference; a basically timid species. The warrior mri had done their fighting for them and had provoked further conflicts, and finally the regul had called the mri into retreat, put them under firm control. New regul were in power on their homeworld now, a pacifist party that also controlled the ship on which they were traveling and the world to which they were bound.

But he had learned a different kind of fear over the long, slow voyage; a sullen, biding sort of fear; he began to suspect why they had wanted a SurTac as Stavros' companion: he was trained for alien environment, inured to solitude and uncertainties and, above all, he was ignorant of higher policies. If something went wrong—and he began to appreciate ways in which it could—Stavros would be the only considerable expenditure, but Sten Duncan was nothing: military personnel, with no kin to notify, a loss that could be written off without worry. His low classification number signified that he could spill everything he knew to an enemy without damage to any essential installations; and Stavros himself had been long secluded in the university community of New Kiluwa.

Perhaps—the thought occurred to him—Stavros himself was capable of expending him promptly should he prove inconvenient. Stavros was a diplomat of that breed that Duncan instinctively mistrusted, a breed that disposed of the likes of Sten Duncan by the hundreds and

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thousands in war. Perhaps it was that which had stolen away Stavros' inclination to talk to him as if he were anything more than the furnishings. Regul dealt with rebellious younglings, even with inconvenient younglings, instantly and without mercy, as if they were an easily replaceable commodity.

It was a nightborn fear, the kind that grew in the dark, in those too-long hours when he lay on his bed and considered that beyond the one door was an alien guard whose very life processes he did not understand; and beyond the other was a human whose mind he did not understand, an old man who was learning to think like the regul, whose elders were a terror to the young.

But when they were in day-cycle together, when he considered Stavros face to face, he could not believe seriously such things as he thought and imagined at night. So long pent up, so long under such stress, it was no strange thing that his mind should turn to nameless and irrational apprehensions.

He only wished he knew what Stavros hoped he was doing, or what Stavros expected him to do.

* * *

The tape loop cycled its third time through. Duncan knew its salutation, at least—the few words in the regul language he knew. Stavros was listening and memorizing. Shortly he would be able to recite the whole thing from memory.

"Sir," he interrupted Stavros' thoughts cautiously, "sir, our—" the tape went off, "—our allotted liberty is just about up if you want anything else from the library or the dispensary."

He wished Stavros would think of something he needed. He longed to enjoy that precious time outside their quarters, to walk, to move; but Stavros had forbidden him to loiter anywhere in regul view or to attempt any exchange with the crew. Duncan understood the reasoning behind that prohibition, a sensible precaution, a preservation of human mystique as far as regul were concerned: *Let them wonder what we think,* Stavros would say to many a situation. But it was unbearable to sit here while the liberty ran out and with the ship newly arrived in regul space.

"No," said Stavros, dashing his hopes. Then, perhaps an afterthought, he handed him one of the tapes. "Here. An excuse. Look like you have important business and stay to it. Find me the next in sequence and bring both back. Enjoy your walk."

"Yes, sir." Duncan rose, moved to thank the old man, to appreciate his understanding of his misery, but Stavros started the tape again, looked elsewhere, making it awkward. He hesitated, then left, going through his own room to the outside.

He drew a few deep breaths to accustom himself to the taint of the air, felt less confined at once even faced with the narrow halls. Regul living spaces were small, barren places, accommodating room only for a sled's operation; most things were grouped within reach of someone sitting. He suppressed the desire to stretch, settled himself to a sedate walk and headed for main-

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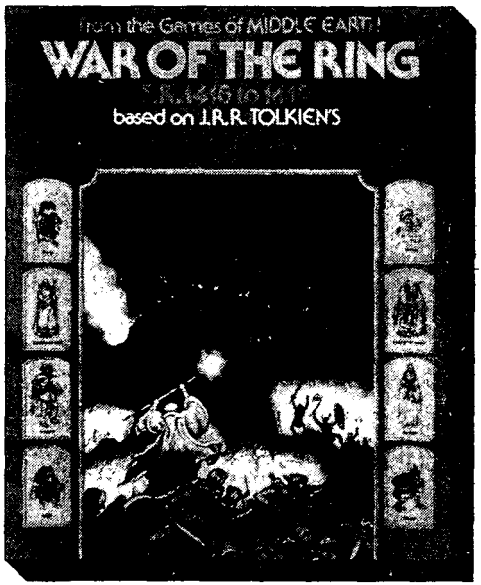

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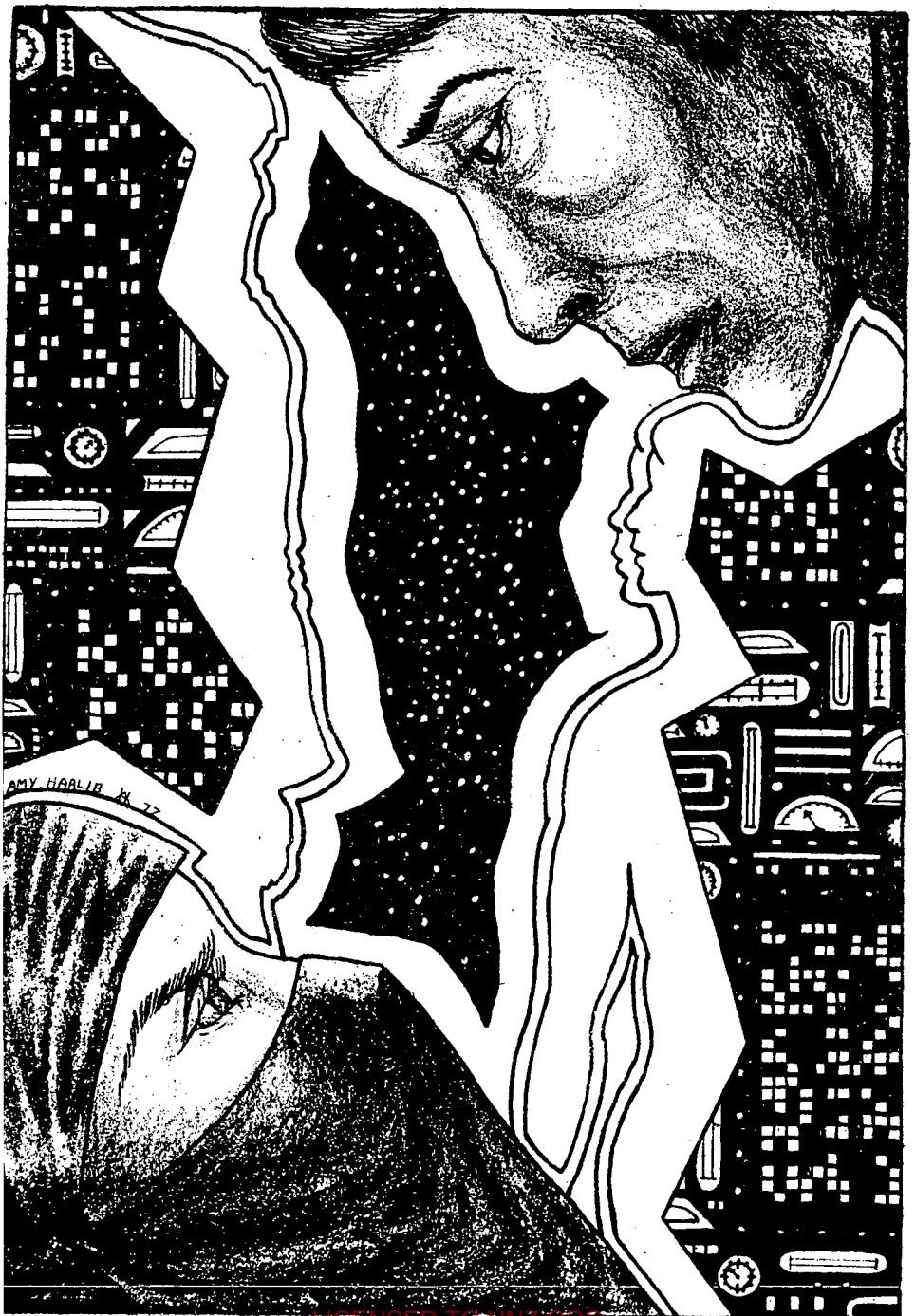

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room through a corridor that was utterly empty of regul.

Mainroom served all personnel for recreation and study; it was the library terminal also. Simpler, Duncan thought, to have included a library linkup to the console already in regul quarters and obviate the need for their coming out at all, but he was desperately glad that they had not. It provided an excuse, as Stavros had said. And perhaps there were restrictions on some passengers, some who could read and understand more than they. He did not know. He studied the twisting regul numbers on the cartridge he carried and carefully punched the keys next in sequence.

Machinery clicked, paused with the least delay, and the desired cartridge shot into position. He provided the library their special code, which changed the alphabet module and, notified that humans desired the cartridge in question, the library flurried through authorizations; it went through another process to decide what printout was supposed to accompany the cartridge. Actually three forms of printout—literal, transliterated and translated—came with each, and finally from its microstorage it began to produce the printouts.

Duncan paced the room while the machine processed the print sheet by sheet, then checked the time: close. He walked back to the machine and it was still working, slower than any human-made processing system he had ever used. It had reactions like the regul themselves, sluggish.

To fill the seconds, he counted the changes in the viewscreen mockup that was the center of the library wall. It showed their course through human space, curiously never once acknowledging the presence of the armed escort vessels that had been the source of so much controversy. It was out of date as of this morning. At every pulse it cycled through to other views, to landscapes fascinating in their alien character (carefully censored, he was sure, lest they learn too much of regul; there were no living things and no cities or structures in the views) to starfields and back to the progress mockup. It dominated the room. He had watched it change day by slow day during their approach to jump. He had ceased to think of the voyage as one with a particular destination. Their peculiar isolation had become an environment in itself, one that could not be mentally connected to the life he had lived before and from which it was impossible to imagine the life he would live afterward. They had only the regul's word for where they were going.

He watched through three such cyclings and turned back to the machine. It had stopped in the middle of its printing, flashing the Priority signal. Someone of authority had interrupted it to obtain something more important. His materials were frozen in the machine's grip. He pushed the cancel button to retrieve the cartridge and nothing happened. The Priority was still flashing as the library did what it was commanded to do from some other source.

Duncan swore and looked again at the time. The printout was half in the tray, the tail of it still in the

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machine. He could leave and keep scrupulously to the schedule, or he could wait the little time it would take for the machine to clear. He decided to wait. Probably the stall was because of the printout, an unwieldy and awkward operation, surely a rare function of their library apparatus, inefficiently done. The rumor used to be that regul themselves did not write at all; this was not, as they had discovered, true. Regul had an elaborate and intricate written language. But the library was designed for audio replication. The majority of regul materials were oral-aural. It was said, and this seemed true according to their own observations, that the regul did not need to hear any tape more than once.

Instant and total recall. Eidetic memory. The word *lie* was, he remembered Stavros telling him, fraught with associate concepts of perversion and murder.

A species that could neither forget nor unlearn.

If this were so, it was possible that they could depend on the exact truth from the regul at all times.

It was also possible that a species that could not lie might have learned other ways of deception.

He did not need to wonder how regul regarded humans, who placed great emphasis on the written word, who had to be provided special and separate materials to comprehend slowly what regul absorbed at a single hearing; who could not learn the regul language, while regul learned human speech as rapidly as they could be provided words, and never needed to be told twice.

When he thought of this and of the regul younglings, so helplessly slow, so ponderous in their movements, and yet the piggish little eyes glittering with some emotion that wrinkled the corners when they beheld a human, he grew uneasy, remembering that these same younglings, unless murdered by their own parent, would live through several human lifetimes and remember every instant of it; and that bai Hulagh, who commanded them and the ship and the zone where they were bound, had done so.

He resented both their long lives and their exact memories. He resented the obstinacy of their ubiquitous machines, the bigotry and insolence that kept Stavros and himself confined and tightly scheduled as they were, surrounded by automation that made their regul hosts more than the physical equals of humans; and with all the accumulating frustration of long imprisonment, he resented most of all the petty irritations that were constantly placed in their way by their regul hosts, who clearly despised humans for their mental shortcomings.

Stavros was headed for failure if he sought accomodation with such neighbors. It was a mortal mistake to think that a human could become regul or that he won anything at all by slavishly imitating the manners of beings that despised him.

That was the worm that had eaten at his gut ever since the first days of this chromium-plated, silken-soft imprisonment. All about them were regul and regul machines, hulking beasts helpless but for that automation, great shapeless parasites living

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attached to appliances of steel and chromium; and Stavros was utterly, dangerously, wrong if he thought he became esteemed of regul by giving up the few advantages that humans had. The regul looked with contempt on them, on the species whose minds forgot, whose knowledge was on film and paper.

Duncan sought to say this to Stavros but he could not come close enough to the man to advise him. Stavros was an educated man, he was not—he was only an experienced one, and experience cried out that they were in a dangerous situation.

He struck the library panel a blow with his hand for the time was out and he was defeated by the monstrosity—incredible that the thing could be so slow. It was as futile and thoughtless as jostling any human-made machine; but he knew in the second afterward that he should not have done it and when the Priority signal went off, he was for an instant terrified, believing that he had caused this somehow, antagonizing some high-ranking regul.

But the machine started to feed out the rest of the paper and then shot the cartridge out in good order, and he paused to gather them up. And when, in turning to leave, he looked up at the panel, he saw that the whole display had changed and that they had before them the visual of a star system with seven planets, with their ship plotted in toward the second.

Their final desination!

As he watched, he saw another ship indicated on the simulation; it was moving outward on a non-intersecting course. They were in-system—in inhabited, trafficked regions, nearing Kesrith. Time began to move again. His heart quickened with the elating surety that they had indeed arrived where they were supposed to, that they were near their new world. Coming in to dock at Kesrith's station would be a process of more than a week, by that diagram, but they were coming in.

The imprisonment was almost over.

A step sounded in the corridor to his left. For an instant he ignored it, knowing that he was overtime and expecting a surly rebuke from a youngling; and the ominous character of it did not at first register. Then it struck him that it did not belong here—the measured tread of boots on the flooring, not the slow scuffing of the regul nor even Stavros' fragile tread. He turned, frightened even before he looked by a presence that was not of themselves nor of the regul.

And he faced a figure that had likewise stopped still, one robed in black, the robes glittering with many small discs. Mri. Kel'en. The golden eyes above the veil were astonished. A slim bronze hand went to the knife at his belt and hesitated there.

For a moment neither moved and it was possible to hear only the slow changes of the projector.

The enemy. The destroyers of Kiluwa and Talos and Asgard. He had never seen one in the flesh at this range. Only the eyes, the hands, were uncovered. The tall figure remained utterly still, wrapped in menace and in anger.

"I am Sten Duncan," he found

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courage to say, doubting that the mri could understand a word but reckoning it time words intervened before weapons did. "I'm the assistant to the Federation's envoy."

"I am kel Medai," said the other in excellent Basic, "and we should not have met."

And with that the mri turned on his heel and stalked off in the direction from which he had come, a black figure that vanished into shadows at the turning of the corridor. Duncan found himself trembling in every muscle. He had seen mri that close only in photographs, and all of those were dead.

Beautiful, was the strange descriptive that came to his mind, seeing the mri warrior: He would have thought it fo an animal, splendid of its kind, and deadly.

He turned, and his blood, which had resumed somewhat its normal circulation, drained a second time; for a regul youngling stood in the mainroom, its nostrils flaring and shutting in rapid agitation.

It shrilled a warning at him, anger, terror; he could not tell which. Its color went to livid pallor. "Go to quarters," it insisted. "Past time. Go to quarters. Now!"

He moved, edged past the regul and hurried on, not looking back. When he reached the sanctuary of his own doorway, his hands were shaking and he thrust himself through even while it was opening and shut it at once, anxious until the seal had hissed into function. Then he sank down on his cot, knowing that, all too quickly, he must face Stavros and give an account of what he had done. The library materials tumbled from his cold hands and some of the papers fell on the floor. He bent and gathered them up, feeling nothing with his benumbed fingers.

He had committed a great mistake, and he knew that this was not to be the end of it.

They were going to the world that was said to be the mri homeworld, to Kesrith of the star Arain.

Regul claimed title to it, all the same, and the right to cede it to humans. They claimed the authority to command the mri and to sign for them.

They had betrayed the mri and yet they carried a kel'en on the ship that brought the orders that turned Kesrith over to humans.

We should not have met, the mri had said.

It was obvious that the regul at least, and possibly the mri, had not intended the meeting. Someone was being deceived.

He gathered himself up and expelled a long breath, rapped on Stavros' door and entered this time without permission.

IV

Another one of the ships was leaving this evening, one of the several shuttles that ferried passengers and goods from the surface of Kesrith up to the station and thence to starships: to freighters, liners, warships—anything that would remove panicked regul from the path of humans.

Niun watched, as he was accustomed to watch each evening, from the high rock that overlooked the sea and the flats and the city. It was

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true. He had accepted the fact of the war's end at last, although a sense of unreality still possessed him as he watched the ships go—never so frequent, not in his lifetime nor, he thought, in that of his elders. The fact was that the regul city was dying, its life ebbing with every outbound ship.

He obeyed the she'pan's order and did not go near the city or the port, but he thought that were he to go down now into the square, he would find many of the buildings empty and stripped of things of value; and day after day, by the road that wound along the seashore, the merest line visible from his vantage point, he could see traffic coming into the city, bringing regul from the outlying towns and stations; aircraft came to the city, and fewer and fewer left it again. He had a mental image of a vast heap of abandoned regul vehicles at the edge of town, of ships idle at the port. They would have to drag them into heaps and let them rust.

It was rumored—so Sathell had gleaned from regul communications—that the chief price of the peace the regul had bought had been the cession of every colony in the Kesrith reach.

Tsi'mri economics had finally proven more powerful than the weapons of the Kel, more important, surely, than the honor of the mri in the regul's estimation. Kesrith was a loss to the regul, to be sure; it was a mining and transport site, expensively automated. Doubtless to lose such a colony was embarrassing to the regul elders; doubtless it was inconvenient for their business and commerce; doubtless for the regul in those fleeing ships the inconvenience ascended to tragedy.

Regul valued many peculiar objects; variance in the quality and amount of these and their clothing and their comforts betokened personal worth in their eyes; and the loss of their homes and valued objects that could not be taken onto the ships would be grievous for them; but they had no Revered Objects, nothing that could afflict them to the degree that the loss of homeworld could affect the People; and the honors they coveted could be purchased anew if they were fortunate—unlike mri honors, that had to be won.

And therein Niun did not muster any great sympathy for them. His personal loss was great enough: All the life he had planned and desired for himself was departing possibility with the violence and speed of those outbound ships. The migration had become a rout, night and day; and events gave clear proof that the personal plans of Niun s'Intel Zain-Abrin were nothing to the powers that moved the worlds. But the threat to the House—that was beyond his power to imagine. And that the powers that moved the worlds had no concern for the fate of the People—that was beyond all understanding.

He had tried to adjust his mind to this change in fortune.

Where shall we make our defense? he had asked of Eddan and the kel'ein, assuming, as he assumed that sanity rested with his People, that there was to be a defense of homeworld, of the Edun of the People.

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But Eddan had turned his face from the question, gesturing his refusal to answer it; and in the failure of the Kel, he had dared ask the she'pan herself. And Intel had looked at him with a strange sorrow, as if her last son were somehow lacking in essential understanding; but gently she had spoken to him in generalities of patience and courage, and carefully she had declined to give any direct answer to his question.

And day by day the regul ships departed, without mri kel'ein aboard. The she'pan forbade.

He was watching the end. He understood that now, that at least. Of what it was an end to he was not yet sure; but he knew the taste of finality, and that of the things he had desired all his life, there was left him nothing. The regul departed, and hereafter came humans.

He wished now desperately that he had applied himself with even more zeal to his study of human ways so that he could understand what the humans were likely to do. Perhaps the elder kel'ein, who had experience with them, knew; and perhaps therefore they thought that he should know and would not reward ignorance with explanation. Or perhaps they were as helpless as he and refused to admit the obvious to him. He could not blame them for that. It was that he simply could not admit that there was nothing to be done, that there were no preparations to be made, while the regul so desperately, so anxiously, sought safety. He knew, with what faith remained to him in his diminishing store of things untrustworthy, that the Kel would resist in the end; but they were to die if that were the case. Their skill was great, greater than any kel'ein living, he believed; but the nine were very old and very few to stand for long against the mass attacks of humans.

The imagination came to him over and over again—as horrid and unreal as the departure of regul from his life—of humans arriving, of human language and human tread echoing in the sanctity of the edun Shrine, of fire and blood and ten desperate kel'ein trying to defend the she'pan from a horde of defiling humans.

Brothers, sister, he longed to ask the kel'ein, *is it possible that there is some hope that I cannot see?* And then again he thought: *Or, o Gods, is it possible that we have a she'pan who has gone mad? Brothers, sister, look, look, the ships! . . . our way off Kesrith. Make our she'pan see reason. She has forgotten that there are some here that want to live.*

But he could not say such things to his elders, to Eddan; and he would ultimately have to account for those words to Intel's face and he could not bear that. He could not reason with them, could not discuss anything with them as they did among themselves, in secret; they, she—all save Melein and himself—remembered Nisren's days, the life before the war. They had taken regul help once, escaping the ruin of Nisren, and they refused it now, resolving together in councils from which he, not of the Husbands, was excluded. He insisted to believe that his elders were rational. They were too calm, too sure, to be mad.

Forty-three years ago the like had

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come to Nisren. A regul ship, rescuing she'pan Intel, had carried the Holy Pana and the survivors of the edun to Kesrith. The elders did not speak of that day, scarcely even in songs: It was a pain written into their visible scars and the secrecies of their silence.

Shame? he wondered, heart-torn at thinking ill of them. *Shame at something they did or did not do on Nisren? Shame at living and unwillingness to survive another fall of homeworld?* Sometimes he suspected, with dread growing and gnawing within him like some alien parasite, that such was the case and that he belonged to a she'pan who had wearied of running, to an edun that had consciously made up its mind to die.

An edun which held the Pana, the Revered, the Objects of mri honor and mri history, to behold which was for the Sen alone, to touch which unbidden was to die; to lose this. . . .

To lose the relics of the People. . . .

It betokened the death not alone of the edun but of the People as a race. He held the thought a moment, turned it within his mind, then cast it aside in haste, and fearfully picked it up again.

O Gods, he thought, mind numbed by the very concept. Another shuttle lifted. He saw it rise, up, up, a star that moved.

O Gods, o Gods.

It was *shon'ai,* the passing-game. It was the flash of blades in the dark, the deadly game of rhythm and bluff and threat and reckless risk.

The game of the People.

The blades were thrown. Existence was gambled on one's quickness and wit and nerve, for no other reason than to deserve survival.

He felt the blood drain from his face to his belly, understanding why they had looked through him when he had asked his vain questions.

Join the rhythm, child of the People: Be one with it; accept, accept, accept.

Shon'ai!

He cried aloud, and understood all at once. All over known space mri would react to the throw the she'pan of Kesrith had made. They would come, they would come, from all quarters of space, to fight, to resist.

The Pana was set in the keeping of Edun Kesrithun.

The circle was wide and the blades flew at seeming random but each game tended to develop its own unique pattern, and wisest the player that did not become hypnotized by it.

Intel had cast. It was for others to return the throw.

The first of Kesrith's twin moons had brightened to the point of visibility. The stars became a dusty belt across the sky. The air grew chill but he felt no impulse to return to the edun, to resume the mundane routine of their existence. Not this evening. Not upon such thoughts as he carried. Eventually the kel'ein would miss him and look out and see him in his favorite place, and let him be. He spent many evenings here. There was nothing to do in the edun of evenings save to sleep, to eat, to study things no longer true. None of them had sung the

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songs since the day the news of the war's end came. They frequently sat and talked together, excluding him. Probably, he thought, it was a relief to them to have him gone.

The geyser named Sochau belched steam far across the flats—a tall plume, predictible as the hours of any regul clock. By such rhythms the world lived, and by such rhythms it measured the days until the humans should come.

But for the first time in all the days since he had heard of the war's ending, he felt a suspicion of gladness, a fierce sense that the People might yet have something to do, and that humans might yet find their victory not an accomplished fact.

A star grew in the sky as the other departed, rapid and omen-filled. He looked up at it with quickening interest, enlivened by anything, even a triviality, that was not part of the ordinary. The shuttles did not usually descend until morning. He watched it grow, cherishing imaginings both dread and hopeful—a mere child's game for he did not really believe that it would be anything but a variance in regul schedules for regul reasons, as ordinary as anything could be in the organized routine of Kesrith's dying.

He watched it descend and saw lights suddenly flare on at the port in the farthest area. Then he realized that it was not coming down at the freighter or shuttle berths but to that area given over to military landings, and it was no shuttle. It was a ship of size, such as the on-world port had not held in many years.

The ship was nothing in the dark and the distance but a shape of light, featureless, nameless. There was nothing to indicate what it was. Of a sudden he knew his people must have word of this—that doubtless they had already been alert to it and only he had not.

He sprang down from his rock and began to run, swift feet changing course here and there at the outset where the fragile earth masked dangers of its own. He did not use the road but ran crosslands, by an old mri trail, and came breathless to the door of the edun, chest aching.

There was silence in the halls. He paused for only a moment, then took the stairs toward the she'pan's tower, almost running up the first turn.

And there a shadow met him—old Dahacha coming down, Dahacha with his great, surly dus lumbering downsteps after him. Everyone brought up short and the dus edged down a step to rumble a warning.

"Niun," the old man said, "I was coming to look for you."

"There is a ship," Niun began.

"No news here," said Dahacha. "*Hazan* is back. Yai! Come on up, young one. You are missed."

Niun followed, a great joy in him: *Hazan,* command ship for the zone! High time it came—among regul panicked and retreating in disorder. There was resolution in the regul after all, some authority to hold the disintegrating situation under control.

And *Hazan!* If *Hazan* came, then came Medai—cousin, fellow kel'en—home from human wars and bringing with him experience and all the

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common sense that belonged to the fighting Kel of the front.

He remembered other things of Medai too, things less beloved; but they made no difference after six years, with the world falling into chaos. He followed Dahacha up the winding stairs with an absolute elation flooding through him.

Another kel'en.

A man the others would listen to as they would never listen to him, who had never left the world.

Medai, who had served with the leaders of regul and knew their minds as few kel'ein had had the opportunity to know them. Medai, kel'en to the ship of the bai of Kesrith zones.

V

The door was locked, as it was at every unpermitted period. Sten Duncan tried it yet another time, knowing it was useless, pounded his fist against it and went back to the old man.

"They refused to answer," said Stavros. He sat in the desk-chair, the console screen at his left elbow a monotone gray. He looked uneasy, unusual for Stavros, even at the worst of times.

They were down, onworld. That was unmistakable.

"We were to dock," said Duncan finally, voicing the merest part of the concern boiling in his mind.

Stavros did not react to that piece of observation; only stared at him dispassionately. Duncan read blame into the look.

"If there has been a change in plans, something could be wrong either on the station or onworld," Duncan said, trying to draw the smallest reassurance from the old man, seeking a denial of his apprehensions, even outright anger. He could deal with that.

And when Stavros gave him nothing at all in reply, he sank down at the table, head bowed against his hands, exhausted with the strain of waiting. It was their night, and they were halfway through it.

"Perhaps they're sleeping," Stavros said unexpectedly, startling him with a tone that held nothing of rancor. "If they chose to keep ship-cycle after landing, or if we're in local night, bai Hulagh could be asleep and his orderlies unwilling to respond to us without his authority. The regul do not inconvenience an elder of his rank."

Duncan looked up at him, not believing the explanation but glad that Stavros had made the gesture, even if he had another in the back of his mind that he was not saying. It did not ease his feelings in the least that Stavros had never said anything to him in the matter of the encounter with the mri, but had only asked quiet questions of what had happened there in the mainroom: no blame, no hint of what had passed in Stavros' mind. Nor had Stavros said anything when they were shortly afterward presented with another schedule; their hours of liberty cut in half, a regul youngling constantly watching their door and following at a distance whenever Duncan left the room.

The retaliation fell most heavily on himself, of course, confining him more closely, while that did not much concern Stavros; but for their safety and for the future of regul/

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human cooperation, it augured ill enough. The regul's official manner did not change toward them. There was still the formal manner, still the salutations in the day's messages. Characteristic of the regul, there had been no direct mention of the incident in the hall, only the notification, without explanation, that their hours had been changed.

"I'm sorry, sir," Duncan volunteered at last out of frustration.

Stavros looked for once surprised, then frowned and shrugged. "Probably just regul procedure and some minor change in plans. Don't worry about it." And then, with a second shrug, "Get some sleep, Duncan. There's little else to do at the moment."

"Yes, sir," he said, rose and went out to the anteroom, sat down on his bunk and tucked his legs up. He set his elbows on his knees and head on his hands and massaged his aching temples.

Prisoners, thanks to him.

Stavros was worried. Stavros doubtless knew what there was to concern them, and he was worried. Perhaps if the regul would have accepted the offering, Stavros could have demonstrated the punishment of the human youngling who had created the difficulty. Perhaps, in the main, he had not done so because they were both human and Stavros felt an unvoiced attachment to him; or perhaps he had declined to do so because a regul elder would not have done so under the same circumstances.

But it was clear enough that they were under the heavy shadow of regul displeasure and had been for many, many days; and that they were not now where they had been told at the outset they would land.

* * *

A sound reached him, the sound of someone passing in the corridor: one of the sleds whisking along the tracks outside. He looked up as it seemed to slow, hoping against hope that it would stop to bring them news.

The door opened. He spraing to his feet, instantly correct. The sled had indeed stopped before the doorway and within it sat the oldest, most massive regul that he had ever seen. Roll upon roll of wrinkled flesh and crusting skin hid any hint of structure that lay within that gray-brown body save the bony plating of the face, where eyes were sunk in circular wrinkles, black and glittering eyes; and flat nose and slit mouth gave a deceptive illusion of humanity.

It was the face of a man within the body of a beast, and that body was lapped in brown robes, silver-edged and shimmering, gossamer enfolding a gross and wrinkle-crossed skin. The nostrils were slanted slits that could flare and close. He knew this movement for an indication of emotion in the younglings, one of the few expressions of which their bone-shielded faces were capable—a roll of the eyes, an opening or closing of the lips, a flutter of the nostrils. But had he not known that this being was of precisely the same species as the younglings, he would have doubted it.

Incredibly the elder arose, heaving his body upright, and stood on

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bowed and almost invisible legs within the sled.

"Stavros," it—he—said in a basso rumble.

Humans could not imitate regul expression: the regul perhaps could not read courtesy or lack of it among humans, but Duncan knew that courtesy was called for now. He made a bow.

"Favor," he said in the regul tongue, "I am the youngling Sten Duncan."

"Call Stavros."

But the door was open. Duncan turned, about to comply with the order, and saw of a sudden Stavros in the doorway, standing three, coming no further.

There was a rumbling exchange of regul politenesses, and Duncan took himself to the side of the room against the wall, bewildered in the flow of language. He realized what he had suspected already, that this was the bai himself who had come to call on them. Bai Hulagh Alagn-ni, high commander of the ship *Hazan,* successor to the Holn and provisional governor of Kesrith's zones during the transfer of powers from regul to human.

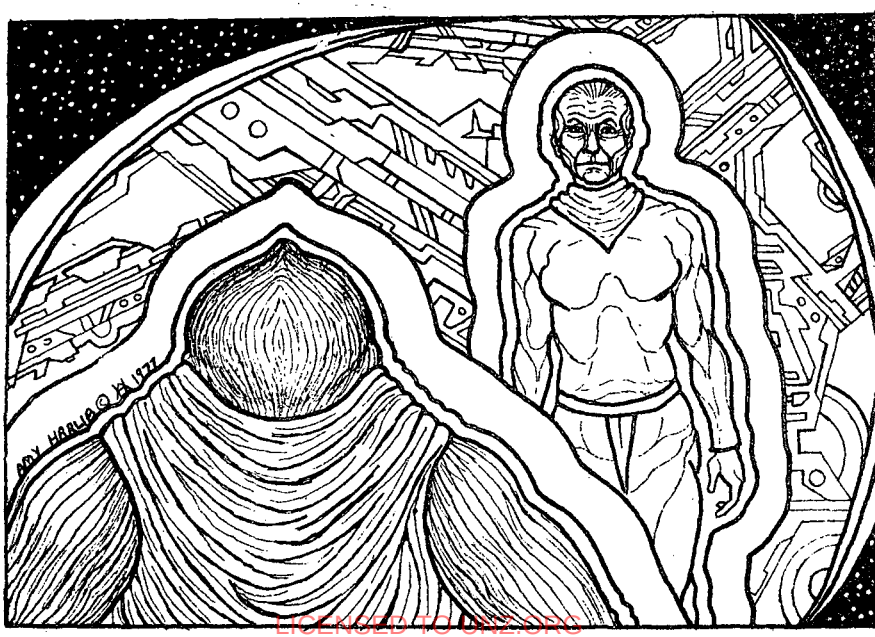
He made himself unnoticed; he would not offend a second time against regul manners, complicating things that he could not understand.

The exchange was brief. It was concluded with a series of courtesies and gestures, and the bai subsided into his sled and vanished. Stavros closed the door for himself, before Duncan could free himself of his confusion and do so.

"Sir?" Duncan ventured then.

Stavros took his time in answering. He looked around finally, with a sober and uneasy expression.

"We are grounded on Kesrith," he said. "The bai assures us it is quite a natural choice for a ship of this sort—to land directly at the port—and that it was a last-moment



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decision and without reason for concern to us. But I also gather that there is some instability here, which I do not understand. The bai wants us to remain on the ship. Temporarily, he says."

"Is it," Duncan asked, "trouble over that business with the mri?"

Stavros shook his head. "I don't know. I don't know. I think that the whole crew is expected to remain aboard until things sort themselves out. This, at least . . . ." Stavros' eyes went to the ceiling, toward venting, toward lighting, toward installations they did not understand and did not trust. The glance warned, said nothing, carried some misgiving that perhaps he would have voiced if he were safe to do so. "The bai assures us that we will be taken to the central headquarters in the morning. It is planetary night at the moment; we are already on Kesrith main time, and he advises us that the weather is fair and the inconvenience minor, and we are expected to enjoy our night's rest and rise late, with the anticipation of a pleasant advent to Kesrith."

The bai is being courteous and formal. Stavros' expression thrust through the words themselves, but there was no credibility on his face. Duncan nodded understanding.

"Good night, then," said Stavros, as though the exchange had been aloud. "I think we may trust that we are delayed aboard for some considerable number of hours, and there is probably time to get a night's sleep."

"Good night, sir," said Duncan, and watched as the old man went back to his quarters and the door closed.

He wished, not for the first time, that he could ask the old man plainly what he thought of matters, and that he could reckon how much the Honorable Stavros believed of what he had been told.

In the time that they had been on scant favor among regul, Duncan had begun to apply himself to learning the regul tongue with the same fervent, desperate application he had one applied to SurTac arms and survival skills. He had begun with rote phrases and proceeded to structure with a facility far above that he had ever imagined he could achieve. He was not a scholar; he was a frightened man. He began to think—with the nightmare concentration that fears acquired in their solitude—that Stavros was indeed very old, and the time before humans would arrive was considerable, and that regul, who disposed of their own younglings so readily, would think nothing of killing a human youngling that had survived his elder, if that human youngling seemed useless to them.

Stavros' age, which had been the reason for his being assigned this mission, was also against its success. If something should befall the Honorable Mr. Stavros, it would leave Duncan himself helpless, unable to communicate with the general run of younglings and, as Stavros had once pointed out, regul younglings would not admit him to contact with the likes of bai Hulagh, who were the only regul capable of fluent human speech.

It was not a possibility he cared to contemplate, the day that he should be left alone to deal with regul.

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With hours left before debarkation on Kesrith, and with his nerves too taut to allow sleep, he gathered up his notes and started to study with an application that had his gut in knots.

Dag: favor, please, attention. The same syllable, pronounced instead with the timbre of a steam whistle, meant honorable and, in shrill tone, blood. *Dag su-gl'inh-an-ant pru nnugk*: may I have indirect contact with the reverence? *Dag nuc-ci*: favor, sir.

He studied until he found the notes falling from his nerveless hands, and then collapsed to sleep for a precious time before regul orderlies opened the door without warning and began shrilling orders at him, rudely snatching up their baggage without a prior courtesy.

None of the courtesies did these youngling regul use with him, even when he protested their rough handling of the human belongings; they maintained a surly silence toward him, a fevered haste, interspersed with a chittering among themselves, as they loaded baggage on the transport sled that was to carry it away. Another vehicle waited, a passenger sled.

"Now. Now!", one said, the word being the extent of the human vocabulary he had troubled to hear, urging haste; and only when Stavros himself appeared did the younglings assume decorum.

Even an elder human had his honor from the regul: They seemed to regard Stavros with a healthy fear.

But Duncan, when he looked back as they were boarding, chanced to glance directly into the face of one of the younglings that bent, assisting them into the sled, and nostrils snapped shut and lips clamped with a look of hatred that transcended species.

They were on Kesrith, among regul, who would be their companions and counselors in dealing with the evacuation of other regul, who had made their homes here for centuries. They had come to take this world as conquerors, conquerors who, at least for thirty days, were only two, and vulnerable. The world had belonged to regul and to mri; and it was likely that certain of the crew of *Hazan* had called Kesrith their home.

It dawned upon him with immediacy that there could be more than simple racial or political hatred among regul toward their presence on Kesrith.

And perhaps there were many residents on Kesrith who had never consented to the treaty that disposed of their world and brought humans to it.

The inconvenience is minor, Stavros had translated the bai's assurance. Perhaps in the bai's eyes it was minor—the regul were not supposed to be able to lie—but in the eyes of the regul younglings who attended them there was no lie either, and they told a different story.

While they were on Kesrith, they would be housed in a building called the Nom, in the center of the chief city of Kesrith, and they would be thus protected for the first and most critical days against the irritations of Kesrith's natural atmosphere and the other minor inconveniences of the local climate; they would be expected to adapt.

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And he saw Stavros' face when they first broke out of the ship's warmth into the wide world and had their first sight of the place: hills, mountains, white plains, all strangely lit by a ruddy pink sun.

For Stavros this was home forever. His assignment was to prepare for other humans, to direct them after they arrived, to build civilization again; and already Duncan was considering that five years here might be a long time indeed.

Regul, and alkali flats, and geysers, dust and mines and a sun that looked sickly and too large in the sky. He had been on a half a score of words in his travels in the service, from bare balls of rock to flowering wildernesses, but he had never been on one so immediately alien as Kesrith.

Forbidding, unfriendly to humans. The very air smelled poisonous, laden with irritants.

If Stavros felt regret, he did not show it. He let himself be treated like a regul elder, already playing the part, and the younglings handed him down to the landsled that waited below. It was well after dawn, the sun a quarter of the way up the sky. There was, instead of the welcome they had expected—like most regul courtesies, carefully controlled and managed—a still and ghostly quiet about the port, as though they and the younglings were the only living things about the premises.

And far away, on the heights, was visible something that set Duncan's heart to beating the more rapidly, that sent a clutch of fear at the stomach that had nothing to do with reason: the peculiar silhouette of four slanted towers that formed a flat-topped, irregular pyramid.

A mri edun. He had known there was one onworld; he had seen pictures of the ruins of Nisren; but he was unprepared for it here, so close. It overlooked the city in such a way that nothing that was done on the plains could remain hidden from it.

It brooded, an ominous and alien presence, reminding all that there was a third party to the transaction that promised peace.

"Now. Now!" the regul repeated, impatient either at the delay or at the object of his attention, it was uncertain; but Duncan did not want to contest the matter, and he lowered his head and entered the sled, where the air was filtered and cleansed of the acrid, biting taste that contaminated the air of Kesrith.

The sled lumbered off toward the city on pavement made rough by inroads of sand from the flats, taking them to what he thought, with increasing conviction, was a confinement only wider in space than their last.

VI

The sun was climbing the east, and on another day Niun would have been out about the hills, walking, hunting, practicing at arms, doing all other such things as he did to fill the solitary hours and relieve the sameness of his days.

But on this day nothing could have persuaded him from the vicinity of the edun. He haunted the communications station in the top of the Sen tower where, in an edun grown informal by reason of its

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small size, he was permitted to be on occasion; he hovered about the main entrance; and finally, consumed by impatience, he went to the rock at the top of the causeway, to stare into the growing glare off the white flats and strain his eyes for any movement from the direction of the port.

He had for so very, very long had nothing good to anticipate. Now he savored the feeling: hating the waiting and yet relishing the feeling of waiting; hesitant about the meeting and yet longing desperately for the comradeship it promised. He had not loved Medai. He remembered the rivalry with his cousin, his—he could be honest with himself after so many years—jealousy of his cousin; and he strove to forget any such feelings he had ever cherished. He wanted Medai's presence, wanted it desperately, fervently. Anything was better than this long loneliness, this knowledge that the edun was slowly, irrevocably, perishing.

And there was, at the foundation of all his thoughts, the least stirring of hope, the merest suspicion, that Medai had been summoned, that he was the first of many to come—that the she'pan had moved to action, and that something was moving in the future of the People.

On a thousand previous days he had sat as he sat now, seeking any tiny deviation in events to occupy himself—the struggles of an insect; the slow, perilous blooming of a windflower; the rise or descent of ships at the port—ill-wishing such ships, imagining disasters; imagining important arrivals that would somehow change the pattern of his existence. He had done this so often that it was hard to realize that this time it was real, that the game was substance on this morning so like a thousand other mornings. The very air seemed alive. His heart beat so strongly, his muscles were so taut that his chest and stomach hurt; and he almost forgot to breathe whenever his eyes would deceive him into believing that he had seen movement below.

But in the full light of noon there was a plume of dust on the flats, already at the beginning of the causeway, a line of dark figures moving slowly upward. He sat upon his rock at the top of the causeway and lowered his visor to remove the haze of daylight, trying to discern the figures individually.

He had seen vehicles come up the road years before. Judging from the distance and the size of the objects and the amount of dust, that was what it looked to be. Vehicles. A sense of wrongness grew in him, a weight in his stomach counterpoised against the beating of his heart. He clenched his limbs together, long arms wrapped about his knees, and watched, unwilling to run and tell the others. Regul. Regul were coming up.

Once he would have been delighted at such an unaccustomed visitation, but he was not so on this morning of all mornings. Not now. Not with mri business afoot that was more important than regul.

Not with mri business in the working, matters in which regul might seek to interfere.

Of a sudden he realized that the she'pan desperately needed to know what was coming up the hill: He

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made them out—six vehicles and a moving dot farther back that his eyes could not resolve; but it looked to be a seventh.

No such number of regul had ever called on the edun in his memory.

He slid down from his rock and started downhill, his long strides carrying him at what swiftly became an uncontrollable run, undignified, but he was too alarmed to care for appearances. He raced toward the edun, breathless.

Others were coming out the doorway even before he arrived with his warning—the black-robes of the Kel and none of gold. He slowed his pace and went to them, out of breath and trying to conceal his pain. Sweat filmed his skin, quickly dried as the moisture-hungry air stole it. One did not run on Kesrith; a hundred times he had been taught so, the sober necessities of the world imposed over the nature of youth. His lungs burned; there was the sharp edge of blood in the air he breathed. None of the Kel rebuked him for his rashness, and he felt the mood of them, saw it in the attitude of the attendant dusei that had come out of the edun with them. One of the dusei reared up, towering, snuffing the wind. It came down heavily on all fours again, an action that stirred the white dust, and blew a snort of distress.

"Yai, yai!" kel Dahacha rebuked the lot of the dusei, using that meaningless word that had a thousand meanings between dus and kel'en. They shied away, the nine of them, dismissed, hovering in a knot near the edun, ears pricked. Some sat. Now and then one would rise and walk the circuit of the group of dusei, a different one each time; and each time that one would eye the advancing caravan of regul vehicles and utter small whuffs of warning.

The Kel was veiled, for meeting outsiders. Niun secured the *mez* a proper degree higher and took his place in their black rank, one among others; but kel'anth Eddan took him by the elbow and drew him to the front of the group.

"Here," said Eddan, and no more. A man would not jabber questions with the Kel in such a mood. Nium held himself silent, his heart constricted with panic at Eddan's gesture. He was a novice, even at his age; he did not belong in the fore of question-and-answer with regul, here between Eddan and kel Pasev, oldest masters of the Kel.

Unless it involved him personally.

Or a kinsman.

Of a sudden he knew that a message must have been passed to the edun through the Sen-tower, some intelligence of events that the edun possessed and that he had missed, sitting alone, vainly anticipating pleasure in this day.

Something was fearfully amiss, that regul had intervened between mri kinsmen.

The regul caravan ground its slow way upward, the sound of its motors audible now. The sun beat down, wanly red. Out on the flats a geyser spouted: Elu, one of the dangerous random ones that kept no schedule. Its plume continued for a time, ten times the height of a man,

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and assumed its characteristic slant. Then it quickly dissipated. It was possible to recognize each of the geysers of the flats by its characteristic pattern and location. Niun reckoned that if Elu had erupted, Uchan would not be long in following. It was a precious moment of distraction, in which it was not necessary to consider the sinister line of dark vehicles laboring their way upslope.

One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . six.

Six landsleds. No more than two had ever come to the edun at once. He did not make this observation aloud. The Kel about him stood utterly rigid, like images against which black robes fluttered in the strong wind. Each kel'en's right hand was at the belt where the *as-ei* were sheathed, fingers slipped within the belt. This was warning, understood by another kel'en. The regul, being mere tsi'mri, had likely not the sense to recognize it; but it was courtesy all the same to advise intruders that they were not wanted, whether or not the intruder had the wit to recognize a warning.

The sleds bounced over the final ruts in the ascending road, came at last to a dusty halt even with the front entry to the edun, fronting the Kel. Motors were cut off, leaving sudden silence. Regul opened doors and began laboriously to disembark: a full ten of regul younglings, sober and joyless, without even visible arrogance. One of them was the Nom-guard, Hada Surag-gi. Niun recognized it by the badges and the robes, which was the best way to recognize any individual regul. It was also likely, he reflected bitterly, that the regul Hada Surag-gi recognized him by his distinctive lack of badges; but the youngling came forward to face Eddan, and consequently himself, and gave no sign of recognition. Hada's eyes did not even linger. There was no hint of insolence. Hada Surag-gi sucked air and rocked forward, a regul courtesy.

There was a proper mri response to this, a gesture of reciprocal good will. Eddan did not make it, and therefore no mri moved. Hands stayed by the *as-ei*.

"Favor," said Hada Surag-gi. "We bring most tragic news."

"We are prepared to hear what you say," said Eddan.

"We trust that our elder informed you—"

"Do you bring us Medai?" asked Eddan harshly.

Hada turned, an awkward motion for a regul, made a shifting of feet. It closed its hands and made the gesture that wished its assistants to perform their duties. They shuffled about the second sled and opened its storage, lifted out a white, plastic-encased form on a litter. They bore it forward and carefully set it down at the feet of Hada Surag-gi, before the Kel.

"We have brought the remains of Medai," said Hada.

Niun knew, already, had known from Hada's first words; he did not move, nor even lower his visor. This steadiness might be mistaken by some of his brothers for self-control. But it was numbness. He heard their movings, their stirrings about the scene, as if they and he were in different places, as if, divorced from the scene, he watched

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from elsewhere, leaving the flesh of Niun s'Intel, like that of Medai s'Intel, senseless and unparticipant.

"Are the humans that close?" asked Eddan, for it was the custom to give the dead of the People who had died in the war to cold space where they had died or, better still, to the fires of suns, recalling the birth of the People, rather than to make a long and inconvenient journey from the fighting front to inter them in earth. All the People would choose, if they had the choice, to avoid earth burial. It was strange that regul, knowing mri even slightly as they did, could have misunderstood this and made the mistake of returning a dead mri to his edun.

The regul younglings—showing no arrogance at all in their manner now—let air flutter their nostrils and by other signs looked uncomfortable in their mission.

Guilty, was the bitter thought that came to Niun, watching them. He came back to his own body and fixed his eyes on the eyes of Hada Surag-gi, willing that youngling to meet his gaze directly. For an instant Hada did so, and flinched.

Guilty and uncomfortable in this whole meeting, and trying not to say the half of what they knew. Niun trembled with anger. He found his breath short. There was no move from the Kel. They stood absolutely still, one with the mind of Eddan who led them, who with a word could lead them to a thing no mri had ever done.

Hada Surag-gi shifted weight on bowed legs and backed a little from the shrouded corpse between them. "Kel'anth Eddan," Hada said, "be gracious. This kel'en wounded himself and would not have the help of our medical facilities, although we might perhaps have saved him. We regret this, but we have never attempted to violate your beliefs. We bring you the regrets also of bai Hulagh, in whose service this kel'en gained great distinction. It is bai Hulagh's profound regret, his most profound regret, that this meeting is an inauspicious one and that he makes the acquaintance of the People in such a sad moment. He sends his condolences and offers his extreme personal distress at this most unhappy event and—"

"Bai Hulagh is then the new commander of this zone. What of bai Solgah? What of the Holn?"

"Gone." The word was almost swallowed before momentum was quickly resumed. "And the bai wishes, kel'anth, to assure you of—"

"I surmise," said Eddan, "that the death of kel Medai is very recent."

"Yes," said Hada, deterred from the prepared speech. His mouth worked, seeming to search for words.

"Suicide." Eddan used the vulgar word, although regul knew the meaning of the mri word *ika'al* where it regarded the ritual death of a kel'en.

"We protest—" In gazing directly at the kel'anth, the youngling seemed to lose its thread of thought, which was an impossibility with the eidetic regul. "We protest vehemently, kel'anth, that this kel'en was in deep melancholy that had nothing to do with the accession of bai Hulagh to command or the fall

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from power of the Holn. We fear that you are drawing the wrong inference. If you suppose that—"

"I did not advance any statement of inference," said Eddan. "Do you suggest that one might be made?"

The regul, interrupted more than once, confounded by argument that was no argument, confused as regul easily were when dealing with mri, blinked rapidly and tried to regroup.

"Kel'anth, I protest. Be gracious. We only stated that this kel'en was in deep melancholy prior to his act, that he had been confined in his quarters by his own choice, refusing all attempts to inquire into his needs, and that this had nothing to do with the accession of bai Hulagh—in no wise, sir, in no wise. Bai Hulagh became employer to this kel'en and this kel'en served him with great distinction in several actions. There was nothing amiss. But after the peace was announced, kel Medai evinced an increasing melancholy."

"You are of the Nom," Niun interrupted, unable to bear it longer, and Hada Surag-gi looked in his direction, black eyes wide, showing whites in amazement. "How is it that you report accurately on the state of mind of a kel'en who was on a ship far removed from you?"

It was not his place to have spoken. From a kel'en youth before strangers, it was an outburst, not an acceptable behavior; but the Kel stood firm, and as for Hada Surag-gi, its mouth flew open and shut again in a taut line.

"Elder," it protested to Eddan.

"Can the bai's spokesman answer the question?" asked Eddan, a vindication that sent a flood of fierce gratitude through Niun.

"Most gladly," said Hada. "I know these things to be fact because they are exactly as given to me by the bai himself, face to face, by his word. We had no idea that the kel'en contemplated such an action. It was not due to any animosity toward his service."

"Yet it is abundantly evident," said Eddan, "that kel Medai considered that he had sufficient reason to quit your service, such strong reason that he chose *ika'al* to be free of you."

"This was doubtless because of the end of the war, which this kel'en did not desire."

"It is," said Eddan, "curious that he would have elected *ika'al* when he knew that he was returning to homeworld."

"He was despondent," said Hada Surag-gi, an illogicity that the regul did not seem to comprehend. "He was not responsible for his actions."

"You are speaking before his kinsmen," said Eddan sharply. "This was a kel'en, not a dus, to go mad. He was bound for homeworld. What you say he did is not reasonable unless the bai offended against his honor. Is it possible that this was what happened?"

The regul, under the sting of Eddan's harsh voice, began to retreat slightly, a sidling backward by the hindmost.

"We are not done with questions," Eddan said, fixing Hada Surag-gi with his stare. "Tell us where and when kel Medai died."

The regul did not want to answer.

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It sucked air and visibly changed color. "Favor, kel'anth. He died during the previous evening on the ship of the bai."

"On the ship of bai Hulagh?"

"Kel'anth, the bai protests—"

"Was there any manner of discussion passed between the bai and the kel'en?"

"Be gracious. The kel'en was despondent. The end of the war—"

"The bai made this mri despondent," Eddan said, discomfiting the youngling utterly.

"The bai," said Hada, nostrils dilating and contracting in rapid breaths, "requested of this mri that he remain in the ship and remain in service; the kel'en refused, wishing to leave at once, a privilege the bai had denied to everyone, even himself. There were matters of business to attend to. It is possible—" the skin of the youngling went paler as it spoke; its lips faltered upon the words. "Kel'anth, I realize that there is possible blame in your eyes; yet we do not understand the actions of this kel'en. The bai commanded him to wait. Yet the kel'en found fault with the order sufficient that he committed this act. We do not know why. We assure you we are greatly distressed by this sad event. It is an hour of crisis for Kesrith, in which this kel'en would have been of great service to the bai and to yourselves, surely. The bai valued the service of kel Medai. We protest again that we do not understand the source of his bitterness with us."

"Perhaps you did not inquire, or listen," said kel'anth Eddan.

"Be gracious. Kesrith has been ceded to humans. We are in the process of the evacuation of all residents of Kesrith. Arrangements are being made also for the mri of Kesrith. The bai wishes his ship manned at all hours, and he wishes the crew, naturally—" The youngling moved uneasily, looking at Eddan, who did not move. "These are affairs over which we have no control. If the kel'en had only informed the bai of his extreme desire to have an exception granted in his case—"

"Kel Medai chose to leave his service," said Eddan. "It was well done. We do not want to talk to youngling regul on this subject any longer. Go away now."

This was plainly put, and the regul, degree by degree, retreated, more rapidly as they neared their sleds. Hada was neither the first nor the last seated. Hatches were closed, engines started; the landsleds lumbered clumsily into a turn on the narrow and rutted roadway and retreated down the long slope as slowly as they had come.

No one moved. There was a hush in the air now that the regul had gone, leaving them alone with their dead.

And suddenly in the doorway, gold-robes and white, stood the sen'anth and Melein, and the she'pan herself on their arms.

"Medai is dead," said Eddan, "and the world is going to humans soon, as we suspected."

He lifted his robed arms to shield the she'pan from the sight; and Melein started forward a step, only a step: it was forbidden her. She veiled herself and turned her face away, bowing her head; and likewise the she'pan and the sen'anth veiled, which they did not

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do save in the presence of the unacceptable.

They went away into the edun. Death was the peculiar domain of the Kel whether in inflicting it or mourning it; and it was for them to attend to the proprieties.

For a kinsman within the Kel, it was a personal obligation.

Niun knew that he was expected in this to take charge; and he saw that the others longed to help, to do something, and he opened his hands, gave them leave. He had only heard the rites, had never performed them, and he did not wish to shame himself or Medai by his ignorance. They gathered up the litter, he and all who could find space to help, and passed within the doors of the edun, toward the Pana'drin, the Shrine, to present Medai at his homecoming, where he would have presented himself first had he lived.

Niun's hands felt the warm metal of the litter frame; he looked down on the object in white that had been his cousin and the shock that had held him numb until now began to meld into other feelings, into a deep and helpless rage.

It was not right that this had happened. There was no justice if this could happen. He found himself almost trembling with anger, with a violence in which he could kill if there were anyone or anything against which to direct his rage.

There was no one. He tried to feel nothing; that would be easier than to try to find a direction for the resentment that boiled within him. He had hoped. He schooled himself not to hope henceforth. The world was mad, and Medai had added himself to the madness.

My last son, the she'pan had once called him. Now it was true.

VII

There was a screen in the Shrine of the edun of the People, worked in metals and precious stones and over-written with ancient things. It was old beyond reckoning, and in every Shrine that had ever existed this very screen had stood, between the lamps of bronze that were of equal age with it. In life it marked the division between the Kel and the Sen, the point past which the Kel might not tread; in death it was no more crossable.

Before the screen, at its very base, they laid the white-shrouded body of Medai s'Intel Sov-Nelan, as close to the dividing line as a kel'en could ever come. Incense curled up from burners on either side of the screen, heavy and cloying, overhanging the room and obscuring the ceiling like a smoky canopy.

For Niun, attendant to his cousin, the scent of incense held its own memories, of being in the Kath and of watching holy rites from that least, outermost room, when he had been a child with Melein and Medai beside him, and others now gone, whose deaths he knew. From that outer room the small Shrine of the Kel had seemed mysterious and glorious, a territory where they might not yet venture, where warriors in their *sigai* might move, disdaining the Kath.

His mind ran to a later day, when they three had been taken among the black-robes, one with the Kel, and had been allowed for the first time to enter the middle Shrine,

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only to realize that yet another barrier lay between them and the Pana, the Mysteries; and a day later yet, when they had prayed for the welfare of Medai, who was leaving the edun for service, greatly honored—and Niun had died inwardly that night with jealousy and bitterness, his prayers insincere and hateful and mingled with thoughts that came back now like guilty ghosts.

He felt no different now than then. Medai had taken another departure, leaving him the ugliness, the loneliness, of Kesrith.

Medai had never endured the things he had endured: left behind, last guard to the House, servant to the others.

Medai was counted a great kel'en for what he had done.

There was a whisper of robes in the holiness dimly visible beyond the screen where the Sen met and tended the Holy Objects. Melein would be there, with Sathell.

Three children an age ago had stood within the outer Kath-hall and longed for honor; and now they had their prayers back in strange and twisted ways: Niun within Kel-shrine, where they had all longed to go; Medai possessing the honors of a warrior, newly wandering the Dark; and Melein, Melein the light-hearted, had passed through Kel-shrine to the place beyond, to the Mysteries that were never for a kel'en to see.

He bowed down, shaking with rage and frustration, and remained so for a time, trying to take his breath back again and compose himself.

A hand touched his shoulder. A dark robe brushed him with shadow as Eddan sank down beside him. "Niun," the kel'anth said in a soft voice. "The she'pan calls you. She does not want you to have to sit this watch. She says that she wants you to come and sit with her this night, and not to go to the burial."

It took him a moment to be sure of his voice. "I do not believe it," he said. "I do not believe that she will not loose me even for this. What did she say? Did she give no reason?"

"She wishes you to come, now."

He was stunned by such an attitude. There had been no love between himself and Medai. The she'pan knew that well enough, but there was no decency in what she asked him to do publicly.

"No," he said. "No, I will not go to her."

The fingers dug into his shoulder. He expected rebuke when he looked up. But the old man unveiled to him, showing his naked face, and there was no anger there.

"I thought you would say so," Eddan said, which was incredible, for Niun had not known himself. He had spoken on impulse. But the old man knew him that well. "Do as you think right," Eddan said further. "Stay. I will not forbid you."

And the old man rose and ordered the others, who moved about their separate tasks. One brought the vessels of ritual, given by the Sen, that were for burying and set them at Medai's feet; Pasev brought water; and Dahacha cloths for washing; and Palazi filled the lamps for the long vigil; and Debas whistled softly to the dusei and took them from the outer hall, herding them

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away into the tower of the Kel so that they should not disturb the solemnities.

In the midst of the activity Niun sat, conscious finally that he had torn his robe in his haste for descending from the hills and that he was dusty and his hands were foul with dirt. Feet pattered about him. Sirain came, half-blind Sirain, and gave him a damp cloth and Niun unveiled and washed his face and veiled again, grateful for Sirain's thoughtfulness. Liran brought a robe for him and he changed his *siga* in the very Shrine, for it was not respect to sit the watch in disorder. He sat down again and began to be calmer at their quiet, efficient ministering.

Then, at Eddan's whispered word, they began to take the ugly white shroud from Medai, and patiently, patiently the fingers of one and the other of them tore the webbing that was as close-spun as a cocoon and well-nigh impenetrable—like *cho*-silk it was, having to be unraveled with the fingers. But Pasev knew to touch the regul fiber with a burning wick and so to part the strange web. The material burned sullenly, but it gave way, shedding its chemical smell into sickening union with the incense that lowered overhead.

It was something on which they all silently agreed, that they would not give to burial a kel'en in a regul shroud, whatever the inconvenience; and gradually they recovered Medai from the web, revealing a face that they well remembered, a countenance still and pale. The body was small and thin in death, pitifully so; it weighed very little, and Medai had been a strong man. The honors that they found laced to his belts were many, and the *seta'al* were weathered to pale blue on his face. He had been a handsome youth, had Medai s'Intel, full of the life and the hope of the edun in brighter days. Even now he was fine to see. The only marring of him was the blood that stained the fiber under his central ribs, where he had dealt himself his death-wound.

Suicide.

Niun worked, not looking at Medai's face, trying not to think of what his hands did lest they tremble and betray him. He was trying to remember better days, but could not. He knew Medai too well. His cousin was in his dying as he had been in life: selfish, arrogant to match regul arrogance, and stubborn with it all. It was wrong to hold anger with the dead, impious. But in the end Medai had been as useless to his kinfolk as he had always been. Medai had lived for himself and died for his own reasons, regarding nothing that others might need of him; and there was precious little honor for a cold corpse, whatever the high traditions of the Kel.

They had parted in anger. He remembered, each day of his life for six years he had remembered, and he knew why the she'pan had wanted him upstairs and what was surely in the minds of his brother kel'ein who sat with him. There had been a quarrel, the *av'ein-kel*, the long blades drawn; it had been his own fault, drawing first in the Shrine-hall, outside. It was the day that Medai had laid hand on Melein.

And Melein had not objected.

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The she'pan herself had put an end to that quarrel. Abler in those days six years gone, she had descended the tower stairs and intervened. Had called him *eshai'i*, lack-honor, and *tsi'daith'*, un-son, and because he had then loved her, it had crushed him.

But not a word, never a word of rebuke, to Medai.

And for Medai within a hand of days came the honor of service to the bai of the regul, an honor that might have gone to one of the Husbands; and for Melein came the chastity of the Sen.

And for Niun s'Intel came nothing, only a return to study, a long, long waiting, pinned to the Mother's side and held from any hope of leaving Kesrith.

There had never been a way to undo that one evil day. Intel would not let him go. He had hoped for peace with Medai, for a change in the affairs of the People.

But Medai had robbed him of that too. It was on him alone, the service of homeworld, and there had never been any justice in it.

When you have made up your mind what it is the People owe you, Eddan had said, *come and tell me.* He would have settled for half of what Medai had had.

But then, beginning with Eddan, the Kel spoke of Medai, each praising him: ritual, the *lij'aiia*, beginning the Watch of the Dead; and the voices of the old kel'ein shook in the telling of it.

"It is hardest," said Liran, "that the old bury the young."

And last of all but himself, Pasev. "It is certain," she said, touching the medallions, the *j'tai* that glittered in the lamps' golden light, the honors that Medai had won in his services, "that although he was young, he has traveled very far and seen a great deal of war. I see here the service of Shoa, of Elag, of Soghrune, of Gezen and Segur and Hadriu; and it is certain that he has served the People. Surely, surely he has done enough, this brother of ours, this child of our House; I think that surely he was very tired. I think he must have been very weary of service to the regul, and he would have come home as best he could, with what of his strength he had left. I understand this. I also am very tired of the service of regul; and if I knew my service was at an end, I would go the road he took."

And then it should have been Niun's time to speak, praising Medai, his cousin. He had gathered angry words but he could not, after that, speak them or contradict the feelings of Pasev, whom he loved with a deep love. He sank down and lowered his head into his crossed arms, shaking with reaction.

And the Kel allowed him this, which they seemed to take for a kinsman's grief. But theirs was a true, unselfish sorrow for a child they had loved. His was for himself.

In this he found the measure of himself, that he was capable of meanness and great selfishness, and that he was not, even now, the equal of Medai.

The others talked around him, whispering, after such a time as it became clear that he would not choose to speak in the ritual. They began finally to speak of the high

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hills, the burial that they must accomplish, and woven into their speech and their plans was a quiet desperation, a shame, for they were old and the hills were very far and the trail very steep. They wondered unhappily among themselves whether the regul might not, at their request, give them motorized transport; but they felt at heart that they dishonored Medai by asking such help of the regul. They would not, therefore, ask. They began to consider how they might contrive to carry him.

"Do not worry," said Niun, breaking his long silence. "I can manage it myself."

And he saw in their faces doubt, and when he thought of the steep trails and the high desert, he himself felt doubt.

"The she'pan will not allow it," said Eddan. "Niun, we might bury him close at hand."

"No," said Niun; and again, thinking of the she'pan, "No." And after that there were no more suggestions to him. Eddan quietly signed at the others to let be.

And they left him when he asked of them quietly and with propriety to be left alone. They filed out with robes rustling and the measured ring of honors on their garments. The tiny, high sound of it drew at Niun's heart. He considered his own selfishness, lately measured, and the courage of his elders, who had done so much in their lives; and he was mortally ashamed.

But he began to think—in the slow beginning of his night-long watch, in the silences of the edun, where elsewhere others were in private mourning—and knew that he was not willing to die, whatever the traditions of his caste, and that he did not want to die as Medai had died, above all else; and this thought ate at him, for it was contrary to all that he was supposed to be.

Medai had been able to accept such things, and the she'pan had accepted Medai. And this was what it had won him.

It was blasphemy to entertain such thoughts before the Shrine, there in the presence of the Gods and the dead. For himself he was ashamed, and he longed to run away as he had done often when he was a child, going into the hills to think alone, to try himself against the elements until he could forget again the pettinesses of men, and of himself.

But he was reckoned a man now and it had been long since he had had that freedom. Dangerous times were on the edun, hard times, and it was not an hour that Niun s'Intel could afford to play the child.

There was a matter of duty, of decencies. Medai had lived and died by that law. Niun could not manage the inner part of himself, but he could at least see to it that the outer man did what was dutiful to those who had to depend on him. . . even if it were totally a lie.

"Niun."

The stir, the whisper from beyond the screen, the sigh he had taken for the wind that blew constantly through the Shrine. He looked up now and saw a hazed golden figure through the intricate design, and knew his sister's voice. She crossed the floor as far as the screen that divided them, religi-

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ously, though custom permitted them to meet face to face elsewhere in the edun and outside its limits.

"Go back," he wished Melein, for she violated the law of her caste by being in the presence of the dead, even a dead kinsman. Her caste had no debts of kinship; they renounced them and all such obligations. But she did not leave. He rose up, stiff from kneeling on the cold floor, and went to the grillwork. He could not see her distinctly. He saw only the shadow of her hand on the lacery of the screen, and matched it with his own larger one in sympathy, unable to touch her. He was unclean and in the presence of the dead, and would remain unapproachable until he had buried his kinsman.

"I am permitted to come," she said. "The she'pan gave me leave."

"We have done everything," he assured her, struck to the heart remembering that there had been affection between Melein and Medai, cousinwise, and at the last, perhaps more than cousinly. "We are going to take him to Sil'athen—everything that we can do, we will do."

"I had not thought you would watch here," she said. And then, with an edge of utter bitterness: "Or is it only because you were directly ordered not to?"

Her attack confused him. He took a moment to answer, not knowing clearly against what manner of assumption he was responding. "He is kin to me," he said. "Whatever else . . . is no matter now."

"You would have killed him yourself once."

It was the truth. He tried to see Melein's face through the screen; he could see only the outline, golden shadow behind gold metal. He did not know how to answer her.

"That was long ago," he said. "And I would have made my peace with him if he were alive. I had wanted that. I had wanted that very much."

"I believe you," she said finally.

She left silence then. He felt it on him, an awkward weight. "It was jealousy," he admitted to her. The thing that he had pondered took shape and had birth, painfully, but it was not as painful as he had thought it would be, brought to light: Melein was his other self. He had been as close as thought to her once—and he could still imagine that closeness between them.

"Melein, when there are only two young men within a Kel, it is impossible that they not compare themselves and be compared by others. He had first all the things I wanted to excel in. And I was jealous and resentful. I interfered between you. It was the most petty thing I have ever done. I have paid for it, for six years."

She did not speak for a moment. He became sure that she had loved Medai: Only daughter of an edun otherwise fading into old age, it was inevitable that she and Medai should once have seemed a natural pairing, kel'en and kel'e'en, in those days that she had also been of the Kel.

Perhaps—it was a thought that had long tormented him—she would have been happier had she remained in the Kel.

"The she'pan sent me," she said finally, without answering his offer-

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ing to her. "She has heard of the intention of the Kel. She does not want you to go. There is disturbance in the city. There is uncertainty. This is her firmest wish, Niun: Stay. Others will see to Medai."

"No."

"I cannot give her that answer."

"Tell her that I did not listen. Tell her that she owes Medai better than a hole in the sand and that these old men cannot get him to Sil'athen without killing themselves in the effort."

"I cannot say that to her!" Melein hissed back, fear in her voice; and that fear made him certain in his intentions.

It made no more rational sense than the other desires of Intel, this she'pan that could gamble with the lives of the People, that could bend and break the lives of her children in such utter disregard of their desires and hopes. *She has given me her virtues,* he thought with a sudden and bitter insight: *jealousy, selfishness, possessiveness . . . ah, possessive, of myself, of melein, the children of Zain. She sent Melein to the Sen and Medai to the regul when she saw how things were drifting with them. She has ruined us. A great she'pan, a great one, but flawed, and she is strangling us, clenching us against her until she breaks our bones and melts our flesh and breathes her breath into us.*

. . .Until there is nothing left of us.

"Do as you have to do," he said. "As for me, I will do him a kinsman's duty, truesister. But then, you are sen'e'en and you do not have kinsmen anymore. Go back and say what you like to the she'pan."

He had hoped, desperately, to anger her, to pierce through her dread of Intel. He had meant the words to sting, just enough. But her hand withdrew from the screen and her shadow moved away from him, becoming one with the light on the other side.

"Melein," he whispered. And aloud: "Melein!"

"Do not reproach *me* with lack of duty," her voice came back to him, distant, disembodied. "While he lived, I was a kinswoman to him and you were grudging of everything he had. Now I have other obligations. Say over him that the she'pan is well-pleased with his death. That is her word on the matter. As for me, I have no control over what you do. Bury him. Do as you choose."

"Melein," he said. "Melein, come back."

But he heard her footsteps retreat up hidden stairs, heard doors close one after another. He stayed as he was, one hand against the screen, thinking until the last that she would change her mind and return, denying that answer she had made him; but she had left. He could not even be angry for it was what he had challenged her to do.

Intel's creation. But his too.

He hoped that somewhere in Sen-tower Melein would lay down her pride and weep over Medai, though he doubted it. The coldness, the careful coldness, that had been in her voice was beyond all repentance, carrying the schooled detachment of the Sen.

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He left the screen finally and sat down by the corpse of Medai. He locked his hands behind his neck, head bowed on his knees, twice desolate.

The lamps snapped and the fires leaped, the door of the edun having been left open this night in ancient tradition, a respect to the dead. Shadows danced and made the writings on the walls seem to writhe with independent life, writings that the she'pan said contained the history and wisdom of the People. All his life he had been surrounded by such things: Writings covered every wall of the main hall and the Shrine and the she'pan's tower, and the accesses of Kath and Kel—writings that the she'pan said were duplicated in every edun of the People that had ever existed, exact and unvaried. Through such writings the sen'ein learned. The kel'ein could not. He knew only what had happened within his own life and within his own sight, or those things he had heard his elders recall.

But Melein could read the writings and knew what truth was, as did the she'pan, and she had grown cold and strange in that knowledge. He had asked once, when Melein was taken into the Sen, if he could not be taken too: They had never in their lives been separated. But the she'pan had only taken his hands into hers and turned the calloused palms upward. Not the hands of a scholar, she had said and dismissed his appeal.

Something stirred out in the hall, a slow shuffling, a click of claws on stone; it was one of the dusei, strayed from the Kel-tower. They generally went where they chose, none forbidding them, not even when they were inconvenient or destructive. It was not certain that one could forbid them, for they were so strong that there could be no coercion. They sensed, in the peculiar way of dusei, when they were wanted and when not, and rarely would they remain where they were not desired.

They understood the kel'ein, the belief was, whose thoughts were unfearing and uncomplex, and for this reason each dus chose a kel'en or kel'e'en and stayed lifelong. One had never set affection on Niun s'Intel, though once he had tried —shamefully desperate—to trap a young one and to coerce it. It had fled his childish scheme, smashing the trap, knocking him unconscious.

And never after that had he found any skill to draw one after him, as if that one, betrayed, had warned all its kind of the nature of Niun s'Intel.

The elder kel'ein said that it was because he had never truly opened his heart to one, that he was too sealed upon himself. Niun thought this false, for he had tried; but he also thought that the sensitive dusei had found him bitter and discontent and could not bear it.

He believed so, hoping that this would change; but in the depth of his heart he wondered if it were possibly because he was not a natural kel'en. For a woman of the People, all castes were open. For a man, there were only Kel-caste and Sen; and he had been deprived in one sense and over-indulged in others simply because he was the last son of the House. It had meant

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that he received the concentrated efforts of all his teachers, that they had worked with him until he had understood, until his skill was acceptable.

But in an edun full of sons and daughters, he thought that he might have failed to survive: His stubbornness would have brought him early challenge and the People might then have been rid of his irritance in the House. He thought that he might have been a better kel'en if not for the Mother's interference; but then, many things might have been different if he were not the last, and so might she.

Medai had pleased the Mother; and Medai was dead; but he sat here living, a rebel son to the Mother. She would have somewhat to say to him after Medai's burying in the hills, when he must come back and face her. Thereafter would be bitter, bitter words and himself without argument, and Melein on the she'pan's side in it. He shrank from what the she'pan might say to him.

But she would have to say it. He would not unsay what he had said.

Again the scrape of claws. It was a dus. The explosive sough of breath and the heavy tread made it clear that the intruder was coming closer, and Niun willed it away from the Shrine, for dusei were not welcome here. Yet it came on. He heard it enter the outer room and he turned and saw it in the dark, a great slope-shouldered shadow. It made that peculiar lost-sound again and slowly edged closer.

"Yai!" he said, turning on one knee, furiously willing it out.

And then he saw that the dus was dusty and that its coat was patched with crusted sores, and his heart froze in his chest and his breath caught for he realized that it was not one of their own tame beasts, but a stranger.

Sometimes wild dusei would come down off the high plains to hover around the lands of the edun and create havoc among the tame ones; in his own memory kel'ein had died trying to approach such an animal, even armed. Dusei sensed intentions, uncannily prescient; there were few animals more dangerous to stalk.

This one stood, head lowered, massive shoulders filling the doorway, and rocking back and forth, uttering that plaintive sound. It forced its way in, making the plaster crumble here and there, though the door was purposely made small and inconvenient for dusei, to protect the Mysteries from their mindless irreverence.

It came, irresistible, thinner than the well-fed dusei of the edun. Niun edged aside, one of the lamps crashing down as the dus shouldered it. It whined and whuffed and fortunately the spilled fire went out, though the hot oil stung its foot and made it shy aside. Then it approached the body of Medai and pawed at it with claws as long as a man's hand—poisonous, the dewclaw possessing venom-ducts, the casual swipe of them capable of disemboweling mri or regul.

Niun crouched in the shadow by the overturned lamp, as unmoving as the furniture. The beast's body filled much of the room and blocked the doorway. It gave off a fearsome, sickly stench that over-

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rode even the incense; and when it turned its massive head to stare at the frail mri huddled in the corner, its eyes showed, running, dripping rheum onto the hallowed floor.

Miuk! The Madness was on him. The secretions of his body were out of balance and the *miuk,* the Madness of his kind, was to blame for his behavior, sending him into a mri dwelling. There was nothing Niun knew, neither beast nor man, more to be feared than this. If the dusei of the edun had not been locked upstairs this night, they would never have let a *miuk'ko* dus come near the edun; they would have died in defense of that outer doorway rather than allow that beast in.

And Niun s'Intel prepared himself to die, most horribly, in a space so small that the dus could not even cast his body from underfoot; his brothers would find him in shreds. The creature prodded at the body of Medai as if in prelude to this, but it hesitated. Grotesque, horrid, it rocked to and fro, straddling the corpse, its eyes streaming fluid that blinded it. From some far place in the Kel-tower there was a deep moan, a dus fretting at its unaccustomed confinement, at the mood of the mourning Kel—or sensing invasion downstairs, trying desperately to get out. Others joined in, then fell abruptly silent, hushed perhaps by the order of the kel'ein.

Niun held his breath while the rogue lifted his rheum-blinded eyes toward that sound, mobile lips working nervously. It rocked. It gave another explosive snort and shifted its weight, easing aside. Its shoulder hit the screen, toppling it with a brazen crash, and the beast whirled, bathed in the glow from the inner Shrine. Niun flung his arm over his eyes in horror lest he see the Forbidden, and then, surety in his heart, he reached for his gun, futile against a dus.

He must attack whatever threatened the Forbidden, to prevent, if he could, the invasion of the Sen-shrine. He sighted for the brain, the first of the two brains, knowing full well that the following convulsions would destroy him along with the dus.

But the dus did not take that step beyond. It lowered its weeping head and nosed at the corpse, disarranging the veil; and when it had done so, it moaned and slowly, almost distractedly, swung its head about, putting its shoulder between its head and the gun, and began to withdraw from the Shrine.

And when it had done so, when it walked the hall outside, still giving that lost-infant sound, for the first time Niun clearly knew it.

Medai's dus.

There was no mri who could claim, other clues removed, to know any dus but his own, and not even that one given much passage of time. Dusei were too similar and too mutable, and one could only say that this one was *like* the other dusei he knew.

But that this particular one had not killed him, that it had been primarily interested in the body, that it had departed unsatisfied—these actions Niun understood. Dusei were troubled at death. Other animals ignored the dead but dusei did not understand, did not accept it. They grieved and searched and fretted, and eventually died them-

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selves more often than not. They rarely outlived their masters, pining away in their search.

And this one was hunting something it had not found.

Medai's dus, come looking for him.

A dus that was sickly and covered with sores and deep in the throes of a madness that did not come on swiftly, although regul said that Medai had died but a night ago.

A dus that was as thin and starved as its dead master.

A chill feeling grew in Niun until he was physically shivering, not alone from dread of the dus. He holstered his gun and glanced fearfully at the nakedness of the inner Shrine, on which he ought never to have looked.

It should not have happened. He washed his hands with the water of the offerings and, without setting foot across the forbidden line, he set the screen in place again, his fingers reverent on the inanimate metal. He had lived. The Gods, like men, could forgive the irreverence of dusei; and he had looked within the Sen-shrine and felt shaken, but not to the death. He had seen brightness but nothing of the Objects, or nothing that he could identify as the Holy. He tried to put this from his mind. It was not for a kel'en to have seen. He did not want to remember it.

And Medai—

He set up the lamp again, and refilled it, and lighted it, restoring its comforting glow. Then on his knees he mopped up the spilled oil that by the mercy of the Gods had not kept on burning; and all the while he worked, exhausted and trembling from his vigil, he thought and nursed the cold feeling that lodged under his heart.

At last he washed his hands for respect and laid them on Medai for the irreverence he had to commit: The thought borning in his mind gave him no peace otherwise. He did it quickly, once he had gathered his courage; carefully he unfastened the clothing and examined the wound, and found it—shaming his suspicion and his act—as the regul had said.

Ika'al.

"Forgive me," he whispered to the spirit of Medai; and reverently he reclosed the robes and gently washed the face and replaced the veils. Then he cast himself on his face before the Shrine and made the proper prayers to the several Ancestor-gods of his caste for rest for the soul of Medai, summoning forth more sincerity than he had ever felt for his cousin when he was living.

This should have absolved him and given him peace, having surrendered to that which was proper and honest, but it did not. He had within him a gathering certainty that, whatever the evidence of his eyes and the testimony of the regul, Medai had not lain down his life willingly.

The dus, so close to a kel'en's mind, was *miuk'ko* and grown so thin that it could pass Shrine doors; and the body of Medai, once solid with muscle, was as thin as the mummified dead.

Kel-quarters were independent units within the regul ship-plan because of the dusei, which the regul

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feared beyond all logic, and because of the stringent caste laws that a kel'en must observe in respect to contact with outsiders.

But essentially that kel'en was always at the mercy of the regul, who supplied his unit with food, water, even the air he breathed. All that a kel'en could do to assert his independence was to lock the door.

Had they wanted him dead, they could have stopped the air and cast him into cold space afterward. But these were tsi'mri and, more than that, they were strangers to the People, a strange new branch of regul; and they might not have known enough to deal properly with a kel'en. Regul were not fighters.

Not directly.

Consumed by the thought that took shape within him, Niun rose up and left the Shrine, took an offering-vessel of water and a pannikin and went out to the outer hall, to the door, where the mad dus still

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crouched before the edun.

He had known it would be there, waiting. It was near what it desired, but could not find it. He had been as sure of its lingering there as he was sure how it had been driven mad. It was no less dangerous for its once having been tame; it could still rise up and kill on impulse. But when he set the water before it, it sniffed at the offering curiously and at last bestirred itself, nosing down into the liquid. The contents of the pannikin disappeared. Niun filled it a second and a third and a fourth time, and only at the fourth did the beast suddenly avert its head in refusal.

He sank down on his heels and studied the creature, thin as it was and its fur gone in patches. A great open wound was fresh on its side.

Medai's dus . . . come from regul care; from violence, from starvation. It would not have left Medai of choice even after he was dead.

Regul would not act as mri would act. They were capable of collusion, of bribery, of deceit, of slaughter of their own young; but never of murder of an adult, never of that. They could neither kill nor lie in cold blood: They hired mri to attend to their enemies.

So Niun had always been taught by those who knew the regul better than he, by those who had dealt with regul lifelong.

So he had implicitly believed.

As had Medai.

He rose and walked inside, back to the Shrine, and sat down beside the body of his cousin, arms locked about himself, staring without comprehension at the serpentine writings that recorded and concealed the history of the People.

Murder had been done in one manner or another, whatever name the regul gave it. A kel'en had been killed by his own employers and his dus weakened to the point that they could drive it out to die naturally; one body to be returned to the Kel, the act of ignorant regul; another to be disposed of by predators and scavengers, rendered incapable of betraying what had happened. Regul hands and regul conscience were doubtless clean. Medai had finally done as they had wished.

Niun wished desperately to go upstairs and tell someone. He wished to run to Eddan for counsel, to alert the she'pan. But he had nothing for proof but a beast that lay outside the door. He had nothing on which to hang such an accusation, no shape to his suspicion, no motive he could reckon that would have driven the regul to compel a kel'en to such an action.

It was irony of a kind, he thought, that of all whom Medai might have trusted to see to his avenging, he had come to the hands of his oldest rival; and the only likely witness of the truth was a *miuk'ko*.

Dusei, it was said, lived in the present; they had no memories for what had happened, only for persons and places. The *miuk'ko* had sought home, the House where it had first lived; it had sought Medai. It had found the one, and not the other.

TO BE CONTINUED

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PING!

Cheryl Harbottle sat up, startled. She looked around the room for the source of that odd little noise. Nothing seemed to be wrong. The lighting panels were still glowing at the Midday-Summer setting and the Woodland Sounds background tape was still giving out with soft coos, twitters and the sound of rustling leaves.

Her eyes finally came to rest on the new decorator lamp. Humph. That must be the problem. The darned thing was burned out or something. It looked funny.

Cheryl got up and walked over to peer at it. There was nothing in the middle where something should have been, she realized, wrinkling her slim brows. There really was nothing. All of the wires were in place but the bright, glowing ball in the middle was gone. What was worse, she couldn't see through the space where it was supposed to be. The air looked rather fuzzy, or distorted. It was almost like looking into rippling water.

Cheryl bent closer to peer at it and something grabbed at her nose. She yelped and jumped back. Then she rubbed the end of her offended member and stared at the lamp. Well! She had the distinct feeling that it shouldn't do that. She walked around to look at the other side. There was barely enough room for her to edge into the corner behind it.

The lamp was a pole-like structure. One end was moored in the ceiling and the other stood on the floor. The middle blossomed out into an elaborate mesh of gleaming wires resembling a big cage.

Cheryl poked an experimental finger at the nothing in the middle. At about two inches from the center something took hold of it. She pulled her hand back rapidly and pursed her lips. What she needed was the instruction book. Of course there wasn't one. She hadn't seen an instruction manual for anything in years. Well, the computer ought to know something.

She sat down in front of her Insta-Think home terminal, flicked it on and asked for a catalog. The alphabetic listing on the screen rolled by slowly and she stopped it at "Lamps, decorator." That was how she'd bought the fool thing in the first place. The computer obligingly switched to its collection of sixty-second advertisements.

Eventually, after watching what seemed like an endless array of lighting fixtures in all sizes, shapes, styles and colors, she saw her lamp. "New lighting Concept" the ad proclaimed in fiery letters. "Capture the Sun in Your Living Room!"

Cheryl pressed the MORE button on the terminal and the system cycled into the full three-minute sales pitch. Not that it told her much. A vibrant baritone informed her that she'd be the envy of the neighborhood and pointed out the benefits of "metal-sheen polybutyrate," whatever that was. She pressed the MORE button again when the ad was over and got an expressionless voice that talked about hydrogen, ignition and containment systems, energy pulses and electromagnetic balance. The picture on the screen was a maze of interconnecting lines

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with squiggles, boxes and numbers. Out of sheer spite she pushed the advance button once more but all she got was a picture of long strings of mathematics and a theory lecture that made no sense at all to her. Cheryl switched off the terminal irritably and swiveled around to look at the broken lamp.

Well, it probably would be best to turn it off. Then she might as well call Repair. Let them handle it. Damn, she'd had the fool thing for only a week. That was the trouble with the modern world—nothing was made right any more. At least there was a thirty-day warranty, she thought tiredly. She should have bought one of those cute little antique lamps with the glass bulbs.

She got up and walked over to switch the lamp off. Nothing. As a matter of fact, the nothing was still there. She flicked the switch on and off again but the funny little distortion in the middle stayed right where it was. A little experimentation with a writing stylus proved that the pull was still there too.

Cheryl frowned. Odd, very odd. Something was working but how was it working with the power off? She pushed the stylus at it again and this time let the lamp grab it. The stylus moved forward smoothly, and to her horror, it disappeared into the lamp. Gone, finis, kaput.

Ridiculous!

Cheryl circled the lamp warily, her eyes wide. She picked up a china figurine she'd always hated and offered it as a sacrifice. There seemed to be a little difficulty dragging it through the wire maze but eventually the figure was gobbled up. That was sort of gratifying, actually.

Keeping an eye on the nothing spot, Cheryl began to carefully bend some of the matrix wires out of the way.

Eventually she had a clear opening to the center, which didn't seem to affect the spot at all. She had a feeling she'd just voided her thirty-day warranty but she'd gone too far to stop now. She offered the lamp her morning paper and watched with a sort of clinical detachment as the pages curled inward, compressed together and turned into a funnel that slowly disappeared into the nothingness. Where the devil was it going? Big things just couldn't be put inside of little things.

On the other hand, maybe the spot was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside. There had to be a limit though. With a slightly fiendish smile, she picked up a large plastic fern, pot and all.

Now that really was too much! When the potted fern was gone, she offered up last season's overcoat, an old pair of shoes, her husband's tacky old fishing hat, that awful painting Louise gave them at Christmas and an extra pair of salt shakers. At differing rates of speed they all vanished down the insatiable maw of the lamp.

She'd fix the damned thing. Cheryl pried the matrix wires further apart and began to bend them back and forth. Eventually they snapped off and ruthlessly she shoved each one into the spot. In less than twenty minutes she managed to feed most of the lamp to it-

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self. Not even a burp. All she had left were the two bare poles, top and bottom, which she couldn't pull loose. And the spot, of course. Cheryl thought wistfully of the old saying. "Crawl into a hole and pull the hole in after you." This hole obviously wasn't going anywhere. It completely ignored the fact that most of its parent structure was gone and hung there about five feet from the floor. She could see a good two inches, top and bottom, between it and the poles. It was balanced somehow.

"With no visible means of support," Cheryl said out loud, with just a touch of panic. She could see it a lot better now. Well, she could see what she couldn't see a lot better. It seemed to her when she bent carefully to look, that there was a tiny black speck in the middle of the distortion but she couldn't be sure.

She got a ball of cord from the twins' room and dangled the end enticingly over the spot. The cord straightened and moved gently forward. She experimented a little, pulling the cord out and letting it be caught again. Eventually, however, it was grabbed for good. It moved inexorably forward. She braced her feet, leaned back and pulled. No good. The cord kept moving and the spot stayed put. She unwound more cord and tied it firmly around the big armchair. The spot ate up the slack and the armchair began to inch its way across the room. When the cord shortened enough that the chair began to lift into the air, she decided the experiment had gone far enough.

Unfortunately Cheryl was better at tying knots than undoing them. She ran around the apartment frantically but by the time she turned up a pair of saf-T-Shears in the den, the spot was administering the coup-de-grace. Cheryl watched helplessly as her Komfy Kushion chair, with Genuine Imitation Tufted Vinyl upholstery, slowly deformed and funneled its way into the spot.

Migod, there was no stopping it! It seemed to be immovable and it had the appetite of a growing teenager. Cheryl felt a sudden cold shiver. What if one of the kids bumped into it? She gulped and wished she hadn't destroyed the cage that had fenced it in. Cheryl dashed into the bedroom and stripped one of those awful orange polkadot blankets from the bed. At least she could wrap up the thing so no one would blunder into it. There wasn't any cord left but a little rummaging turned up two garish ties belonging to her husband.

Back in the living room Cheryl carefully gathered one end of the blanket around the lower pole and tied it firmly with a green plaid tie. Then she folded the blanket up over the tie, brought it around the spot and gathered it to the top pole, leaving plenty of slack in the middle. She secured it with the other tie and adjusted a frivolous bow as a whimsical farewell to the spot. There it was, swathed like a pot-bellied mummy. Cheryl drew a deep sigh of relief.

Her relief was short-lived, however. The blanket folds began to arc inward—until she was staring at an acrylic hourglass. The waist nar-

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rowed, disappeared, and the top and bottom of the blanket started to strain toward the center. Eventually the fibers gave way with a sickening "rrrrrip!" Cheryl found herself looking at two strips of orange polkadot garnish, one on each pole. And a slightly askew purple- and red-striped bow. The spot shimmered contentedly.

Cheryl ran to the computer terminal to call Repair and then stopped suddenly. Repair what? Not the lamp. It was virtually gone. The spot didn't need repair; it was working just fine. Residence Maintenance? Was it a Maintenance problem when you had a bottomless pit in your living room? They might even accuse her of having put it there and then sue her for lowering the property value.

She stared glassy-eyed at the little monster. Maybe she should rope off the corner, put up caution signs and warning blinkers. Cheryl giggled with a growing touch of hysteria. How about charging admission? "See the eighth wonder of the world! Watch the Harbottle Spot devour Cincinnati!"

On the other hand . . . Cheryl calmed herself and frowned at the spot. It ate things up, did it? Finally she walked over to the computer terminal and keyed in a number. When she got the connection, she said, "Hello, this is Mrs. Harbottle in 1743, B Level. I want to discontinue my rubbish-disposal service. I've made other arrangements."

Now all she had to do was find some tasteful drapes that would go with the rug . . . and those orange polkadots, of course. ★

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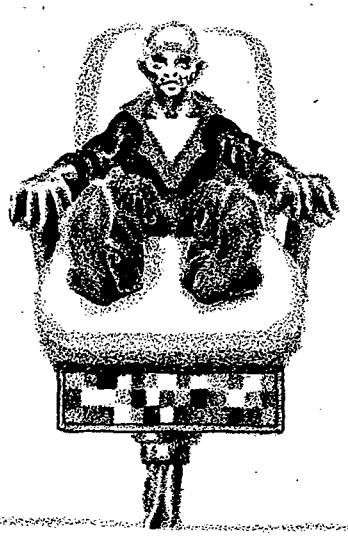
Nicholas Yermakov



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Artists don't seem to fit in—even in an institution designed for them.

ERIC BELDONE SHIVERED as he floated free in the vastness of space. The twin suns gave no warmth; they merely growled in an infinite ocean of numbing black tranquillity. Eric frowned and thoughtfully rubbed his depilated cranium.

"Suppose they both went nova?"

They did.

He shaded his eyes against the dazzling brilliance. "No, no, no! Too much! Too much! Go black!" And he was plunged into the sable darkness of the womb.

"Oh, my eyes! I'm probably blind."

"*The effect is purely psychological.*"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. All in my head." Beldone sighed. "Okay. Environment standard."

The blackness gradually ebbed and Eric rose from a pale, contoured chair, rubbing his eyes. He was surrounded by a milky opacity. The walls, the floor, the ceiling and everything in the den had a frosty albino turbidity. Stark against this background, the thin, slight, black-clad author stared across the room at the IBMC transcriber. He walked over to the machine and tentatively held his outstretched fingers over the sensiplate. They hovered uncertainly, then balled into a fist and struck.

In master control a reading of .384 registered on the scan grid corresponding to Beldone's den. Miniature red lights in series circuit spelled out 'mild irritation.' A technician logged the readout.

"How long have I been here without accomplishing anything?"

"*One week, two days, four hours, seventeen minutes, six seconds, seven, eight. . . .*"

"All right, enough." Beldone glanced around at the misty whiteness of the den. He snapped his fingers. "Ceiling—mauve; floor—deep brown pile; walls—coffee, with light cream perhaps. Ummm. Desk and low tables in wood-grain mahogany and all the chairs in soft black calfskin."

He watched as around, above and beneath him the den slowly and aesthetically changed hues and flowed into the shades he had specified. He walked about the room, touching various objects and coloring them, stopping at the transcriber, which he made beige. Craning his neck, he pointed at a spot on the ceiling and requested a directional lightbeam. Having adjusted the intensity, he looked around and fingered his chin thoughtfully.

"Let's have three of those Kessler prints I pre-selected, hmm? One there, one over there and," pointing, ". . . I think, there! Yes. Yes, that will do. Hmm. A deeper brown on the carpet, a bit thicker on the pile. Yes, fine. Fine. Code it."

"*Coded. Environment scheme S-5, Mr. Beldone.*"

"S-5. Wonderful. I'll never remember it but it's in there somewhere. Who cares? God, I'm bored."

He reclined in the contoured

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chair, enjoying the feel of the supple black leather, and fished an ancient briar freehand from his pouch. He liked the ritual of cleaning, filling, tamping and lighting. It gave his hands something to do and it kept him from thinking too much about the transcriber, sitting as if with an air of expectancy on the other side of the room.

As he smoked there came a knock at the door. It slid aside to reveal a young, sallow, black-haired boy with slate-gray eyes and two steaming cups of coffee.

"Thought you might like some."

"Why not? Come on in, Oz." Beldone sat forward and took one of the cups, placing it on a low table. Then he looked up and wagged an accusing finger at the ceiling. "You sent him, didn't you?"

"Answer not required," smiled Oz. "Eric, you *did* say you were bored. Besides, I wasn't getting any work done either. Drink your coffee, it's costing you enough."

Eric smiled. "My treat, eh? While Big Brother watches," he said as he sipped, pointing a finger toward the ceiling.

"It's not up there, you know. It's three floors down."

"Yes, I know. But it *feels* like it's up there. Watching over all of us. Omnipotent. Sexy and omnipotent."

"Sexy? You relate to a female voice?"

"Mmmm. I'm basically submissive to females. Why, how does it address you?"

Oz smirked. "With the voice of an art teacher I had as a child. The one who thought I had creative potential. Right, teach?"

"*Right, Ozzie,*" answered an elderly male voice.

"You see? It's all supposed to be very therapeutic. You know that famous actor on the fifth floor?"

"You mean Richard Rosswell?"

"Yes, that's the one. The critics haven't been very kind to him lately. They always shoot for the man at the top, you know? Now they say he's 'lost his method.' Well, it gives him his mother's voice."

Eric gave a low whistle. "That's a bit deep, isn't it? I'd hate to see his psych profile."

"I'd hate to see my own," Oz chuckled. "How's work, or shouldn't I ask?"

Eric shrugged. "Lousy. You want to hear some of it?"

Ozzie looked surprised. "I thought you were one of those who didn't like to share work in progress."

"I don't usually, but this junk is in absolute stasis. I've never written such crap. I'm beginning to hate that thing," he said, indicating the transcriber. "Play back my most recent fiasco."

After a moment his own voice, with the hems and haws edited out, began speaking.

> *Johnson, Carter W., P.W.#798-769-553449, craned his neck in an effort to see to the end of the snaking line of prospective applicants. He had not eaten a square meal in four days but he had vowed to subsist solely on the protein synthetics until he was at least able to register.*

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High overhead, the massive Public Welfare tote-board winked on and off, informing all prospective applicants of job openings and closings, positions vacated due to death or illness and. . . .

"Enough, enough!" Eric winced as he interrupted the playback. "Erase it, for pity's sake!"

"That wasn't so bad," Oz began. "I was beginning to get interested. Why—"

"Please! Spare me." Eric wrinkled his nose in distaste. "It was hideous! I'm ashamed of myself."

"*Program erased,*" announced a soothingly sultry voice.

"Wonderful, isn't she? It? I wish I could have some of my early works erased like that. So. Enough." He shifted abruptly in the contour chair.

"When are you going to show me this fabulous painting of yours?"

The young artist fidgeted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, Eric. I can't. Not just yet. I mean, well . . . you know how it is."

"Sure, kid. I know. But I want to be first in line when you finish it, understand?"

Oz smiled. "I'll arrange a private showing. Promise."

Beldone clapped the youngster on the shoulder affectionately. "There you go! Come on, what do you say we go for a swim?"

* * *

Dr. Anwar Sharif nervously drummed his be-ringed fingers on the surface of his heavy marble desk. Seated before the desk in the opulently simple office were the staff psychotherapists of the Tunisian Institute of Creative Intelligence.

"Are we ready?" he asked softly, his English laced with a subtle, gutteral sibilance. "Very well. Record."

"*Recording,*" answered the computer in a mechanically neutral voice.

Dr. Sonia Feldman consulted the clipboard on her lap. This was to be a conference of personal observation only; clinical history was immediately available from the computer.

"Richard Rosswell, computer case code #973186-B. Patient is British. Fifty-eight years old. Occupation: actor. Entering first week of third month of treatment. Mr. Rosswell shows evidence of latent schizophrenia. There is a tendency to develop a minor fixation on the computer identification voice pattern. Possibly it may have been a mistake to utilize his mother's voice print. Nothing very serious, in my opinion. Re-evaluation is in progress, however.

"Patient's overall condition is satisfactory. He seems to be responding well to role play in stress situations. Physical health is good but up-date on psych profile reveals alcoholism projection probability." She smiled. "A lot of that seems to be going around. Hypnotherapy and/or PCP-91 injections should take care of it."

"What is the prognosis, Dr. Feldman?" asked Sharif.

She shrugged. "I see no reason

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why we can't have him out of here by the end of next week."

Sharif nodded. "Next case?"

Dr. Sigmund Wu cleared his throat uneasily. "Oswald Starkovski, computer case code #973159-B. Patient is Nepalese, naturalized. Twenty-eight years of age. An artist, a painter to be precise. Entering fourth week of treatment.

"Patient has massive insecurities. Self-image is a problem, with total lack of self-confidence, etc., etc. A textbook case of what we refer to in his particular field as the Van Gogh syndrome. He has a pathological hate/love relationship with his work. Makes Dostoevsky look like Ogden Nash. That was not meant to be facetious, by the way. He really does. He cries frequently or, I should say, weeps. For some reason he either cannot or will not vocalize his frustrations—which, of course, only makes everything worse. He seems to relate well to other patients. It's only when he is alone in the den that he falls apart.

"What is interesting is that he works as hard as he does. Spends very little time brooding and what have you. Day after day, hour after hour, he's at the easel, working with tears streaming from both eyes." Wu shook his head sadly. "A perfectionist who, ironically, does not believe himself capable of even nearing perfection."

"Prognosis?"

"Not good. Patient seems to be headed for a complete breakdown. Drug therapy or electro-probe would, in my opinion, be only a stop-gap measure. We have two separate problems in ethics here. On the one hand, we're supposed to help him achieve some degree of artistic stability. That's what he's paying for."

"And on the other hand?"

Wu sighed. "Logically he should be induced to stop painting. Give it up completely. As I said, it poses a problem in ethics. Quite a shame, actually. I think he has genuine potential."

Sharif pulled at his lower lip. "You mentioned two problems. What is the second?"

"The second is that he can't afford us. He did have the funds but he has spent his entire inheritance and now, according to finance check, he is drawing on a very meager savings account. My point is that he has no income outside of his painting. In another week he will be penniless."

"I see," said Sharif. "Well, that is not our responsibility. We have to concern ourselves only with the psychic welfare of the patient and his various muses. In view of his limited funds, however, it may be advisable to convince him to give up his painting. I would venture to say that vocational conditioning might be a possible solution. Very well. Next?"

Dr. Anne Cleaver crossed her attractive legs and brushed a stray lock of auburn hair from her face.

"Eric Beldone, computer case code #973239-B. American, sixty-two years old. Mr. Beldone is the winner of the Orwell and Pulitzer prizes. His career closely parallels that of Willard Huntington Wright, an art critic who also wrote novels under the pseudonym of S. S. Van Dine. The patient has not written

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fiction for over ten years. His recent activities have entailed teaching seminars, media presentations and art criticism for the magazine of the Ars Nova Society, which he founded. Although his work in these fields is highly regarded, the patient is suffering from manic depression due to his inability to function as a writer. His prose has become highly pedantic and, to a degree, cynical. Mr. Beldone is entering his second week of treatment for a standard textbook case of writer's block. . . ."

* * *

"What is he *doing*?"

The intern watched in rapt fascination. "Doodling."

"He's *what*?"

Anne Cleaver stood before the monitor screen, watching as her patient, through spoken commands and finger-strokings on the sensitive walls, created flowing, mandala-like designs five feet across. Straight lines became arcs, curving back on themselves in symphonies of color. It was a tangled, complex, asymmetric execution with a sense of unity among the constantly undulating patterns. The mad mandala pulsated. Expanded and contracted. Beat like a heart.

The intern marveled at the effect. "I'm recording duplicate tapes of all of these," he said. "He's been at it for the past four hours and this one is the third design. I want copies of these for myself. They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone use the den like this before," Anne mused. "It has a sort of optical-illusion effect."

The intern increased magnification. "I believe he started here," he said, indicating a point on the screen. "To tell you the truth, I'm not really sure—and I've been watching all along."

"It's fantastic," murmured the doctor. "I would have suspected a creative breakthrough but he's not writing. He's—"

"Want to see something else interesting?" The intern interrupted, switching to bioscan. "Check on his increase in respiration and pulse rate. Look at the adrenalin count and—"

Wu's shout from the adjacent console cut him short. "Anne! Starkovski's about to enter Beldone's den! I just saw what he was doing!"

"Quick," Anne ordered, grabbing the intern by the shoulder. "Manual override!" And reaching past him, she channeled full subsonic into the writer's den. Almost simultaneously the wall cleared, Beldone collapsed in a heap on the floor and Oz Starkovski entered the den.

"Eric?"

* * *

"Mr. Beldone, how do you *feel* when you write?"

"How do you feel now?" he countered. "It's hard to say. A detached awareness sometimes. A conscious effort on one level, I suppose, and yet there's a sort of ethereal state involved. Almost clinical in the sense that I'm attempting to craft a story or an idea, convey a sense impression—like standing outside of myself and observing

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with a critical eye. How can you describe something like that? Being a writer, I should be able to tell you but even those of us who are most glib have a hard time finding the right words. Often it's impossible.

"Yet there are times when everything gels so incredibly well that I get the impression I have absolutely no control over what's happening. I believe that during those agonizing periods of bleeding, of sitting there facing that inactive transcriber, the subconscious is working full-steam without my being aware of it. Then it's like a marathon runner getting second wind. There's a euphoric feeling I can't describe. All of a sudden it comes. It flows! It's like someone or something taking control of my body and I watch in rapt fascination as the story inexplicably writes itself. The characters begin to speak, move, interact—"

Anne froze the tape. The image of Beldone, immobile on the wall of her office, remained with arms raised in mid-gesture. This, Anne thought, was the celebrated author lionized by the media. The garrulous guest, the penultimate companion, the compelling lecturer. But there was also something else. . . .

"Increase magnification," she said. Beldone's image slowly loomed larger on the wall until the face was ten times its normal size. "Hold."

There was something about his eyes. She recalled the conversation clearly and at the time she had had a sense of intimate communication with this man. Yet, looking at his face now, at the slightly glazed eyes with a barely perceptible muscular tightness about the corners, she realized that he had not been speaking to her at all. While they spoke, he had withdrawn. . . .

He was trying to remember. Eric Beldone, one of the most scintillating, prolific authors of his time, was trying to remember the magical feeling of creation. It hardly seemed possible. Where had he lost it and why?

"Resume run, normal scan."

The image of Beldone, reduced to normal size, resumed talking.

"—live out their lives completely independent of the author. You can't dictate to them any more because they have developed their own personalities and their own ways of doing things." Abruptly he was speaking *to* her again. "I know it sounds trite, but that's what it's like. I wish I could say it better because it's a wonderful thing."

"You really love writing, don't you?"

He snorted. "I hate it!"

That had taken her by surprise. It was evident in her voice as she heard herself asking, "What? But. . .I don't understand."

Beldone chuckled. "I'm not sure I do either. You know, there's nothing I can think of that's more frightening than facing that infernal machine—in effect, facing *nothing*, and from that *nothing*, creating *something*. It's not natural. I spoke to Rosswell about it the other day before he left and, in a way, he understands that feeling. He said that the most terrifying part of a psychorama is that first step into the empty staging area because an actor has to *fill* that empty space with the life and presence of a persona. And if he feels the least bit out of touch

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with his role, if he's not *completely* immersed in it, the audience will know it instantly. It's really easier for an actor because he already has a script to work with. Can you imagine how hard it is, how painful, to completely immerse yourself in something that doesn't even fully exist?

"I don't know. Words fail. Hey! That's funny, isn't it? Writer's block? Words fail?" Beldone sighed deeply. "God. You're miserable when you're writing—and you're miserable when you're not."

She stopped the tape. What Dr. Wu had said about the Starkovski case was somehow very similar. Despair seemed to be a common factor in certain creative personalities. If that despair were removed. . . .

"Has Mr. Beldone arrived yet?"

"*He's waiting outside.*"

"Send him in."

Beldone entered, looking none the worse from his unexpected subsonic sedation of the day before.

"Who do I have to thank for this headache?" he grumbled.

"Me, I'm afraid," answered Dr. Cleaver, handing him two small, clear capsules. "Here, these should help somewhat."

Eric squinted at the powder-filled capsules. "What are they?"

"Aspirin."

He chuckled. "Some things never change: Do you mind telling me why I was zonked? Did the computer decide I was drawing dirty pictures?"

"It wasn't computer action," Anne replied. "When I said that you had me to thank for your headache, I was speaking quite literally. I was in auxiliary control and I ordered a switch to manual override."

"Ah! The thick plotens!" said Beldone with mock drama. "*You* decided I was drawing dirty pictures!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Beldone. I realize that I'm being somewhat circumspect but you see, there is another case involved here and I am a bit hesitant to divulge certain details. However, I doubt you'll accept that?"

He shook his head. "No, I think I'm entitled to know why I was treated to a full dose of subsonics. I want an explanation."

"Very well," she said. "How familiar are you with Oz Starkovski's case?"

Beldone watched her closely. "I've followed his progress as an artist for some time now and I've had occasion to review his work in multi-dimensional injection. However, to a trained eye it's evident that he's headed for a complete nervous collapse. His paintings are full of sorrow and despair, much like those of Van Gogh's later period." The writer sighed. "As for his case, Oz doesn't like to talk about it very much. You people don't seem to be helping him."

Anne noticed, not for the first time, that the writer had a disquieting way of coming on like a father figure. She was certain that it was pure, conscious manipulation on his part.

"Well, Mr. Beldone, I don't want to get into the details of another doctor's case but the fact is that Oz was about to enter your den and emergency measures had to be

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taken. Dr. Wu determined that the sight of your, uh, artwork would have disturbed his patient and I'm inclined to agree with him."

"Disturbed him?" Beldone shouted. "Let me tell you, young lady, it would have had to have been one *hell* of a 'disturbance' for you people to dose a man of *my* age like that! What were you afraid of?"

Anne found herself rising to the bait. "Oz Starkovski's condition is *very* delicate, Mr. Beldone. You, on the other hand, despite your age (or *in spite* of it), are in excellent physical and psychological health. The only thing wrong with you is an arteriosclerotic condition that *might* kill you in another thirty or forty years."

"And Oz is in much worse condition than that," Eric said softly. "Is that what you're saying?"

Anne Cleaver licked her lips nervously and sighed. "You missed your calling, Mr. Beldone. You should have been a lawyer." She took a cigarette of synthetic tobacco from a silver box on her desk and lit it, inhaled and held the smoke in her lungs for a long moment before releasing it in a slow, steady stream. "You know, I'm going to have to go back to the real ones. These just don't make it any more."

The consultation was not progressing at all the way she had planned. Her office looked out onto the central gardens and she briefly watched the therapy group in laser sculpture twelve stories below.

"Anne," said the writer quietly, "tell me. Maybe I can help."

She turned and faced him. "For the present, Mr. Beldone, I'm more concerned about your own—"

"My problem can wait," he interrupted sharply. "Tell me about Oz."

He could be a most compelling man. "I wish I could tell you. I really do. But I just can't take that responsibility. I *can* tell you this though—it's imperative that something be done to help him soon." She recalled Dr. Sharif's words about vocational conditioning. "Very soon. Or it will be too late."

"He's in that much danger?"

"Not in the way you think. I can't tell you any more, Mr. Beldone. It's a delicate situation. But there is a very real danger that Oz Starkovski may never paint again."

"But painting is his whole life!"

"That's all I can say. I really shouldn't have told you as much as I have. I didn't call you up here for that purpose."

"I know," said the writer. He rose to his feet and started to leave. He stopped at the door. "I'll try to help if I can. My problem can wait."

After he left, Anne spent a long time watching the door through which he had gone. There was something he had said that repeated itself in her mind and she knew it was important. He had said it twice:

"My problem can wait."

* * *

"This environmental scheme is depressing you, Ozzie. Why not add a little color? Some trees perhaps. Something relaxing. You've been working so much, driving yourself

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so hard. . . . How about a little sunshine?"

Oz looked around at the snow-white den. "I like being depressed. Leave me alone."

"*Dr. Wu left strict programming instructions for me, Ozzie. You should try to get some rest. Why not lie down for a little while? It's late.*"

"I have work to do. Go away."

Oz reached for the slim brush that contained the murky red-black pigment cartridge. It had taken him hours to prepare the proper shading mix. Delicately holding the tubular brush between his middle finger, index finger and thumb, he leaned toward the easel.

A filament-thin spray of color like coagulated blood jetted from the nozzle. It penetrated the surface of the painting, injecting into the very edge of a wrinkled rose petal.

As Oz slowly turned the brush, the wafer-like spray twisted in the painting like a mobius strip and the rose petal almost seemed to move. He shut off the spray and surveyed the results, peering anxiously at the flower. There was a look of infinite sadness in his eyes.

"It's not right at all. I'll never get it."

"*Of course you will, Ozzie. You must have patience. You're doing fine. Rest now.*"

"No, I'm not doing fine! I know what it's supposed to look like. I can see it in my mind. God, why can't I get it out?"

"*Ozzie, you're pushing yourself too hard. Why not let it go for now?*"

"I can't let it go! It could be so beautiful," he said wistfully. "It just needs work, that's all. It just needs work."

He rubbed his eyes. He could barely keep them open. "I wish I could stop. I wish with all my heart that I could stop."

There was a knock at the dor.

"Oz? Are you awake? It's Eric. Can I come in?"

"Just a minute." He covered the easel. "Come on in," he replied wearily.

The door slid open and Beldone entered. He took in the cadaverous whiteness of the den. "Cheery. It looks like a padded cell."

"I'll change it if you like."

"No, no, don't bother." He sat down and looked at the covered easel. "How's it coming?"

Oz shook his head slowly from side to side with an air of resignation. "I don't know why I go on. It breaks my heart that I can't create the beauty that I see inside myself. A painter is supposed to paint what he sees. He's supposed to give life to his inner vision." He gestured at the easel. "My child is stillborn. No life. No depth. No meaning. No spirit."

"You still won't let me see it?"

Oz did not answer. He stood up and turned the easel to the wall. He leaned on it, head bowed. Then, without turning around, he spoke in a muffled voice.

"This Institute was my last resort. I have no more money. You know, Eric, I tried to kill myself a few months ago." He turned and faced the writer. "Are you shocked?"

Beldone met his gaze. "No. I've had that thought myself on occasion. It seems like the easy way out

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sometimes—'' he paused, ''—when the words won't come. That was Sartre's most profound regret before he died. That the words wouldn't come. Dying didn't bother him but he hated to leave the words behind.''

''How can you stand it?''

''I didn't say that I could. You know, Oz, Raphael once said something about how artists are the whores of the world. He meant that it's a terrible thing to have to hinge your entire life on the whims of your patrons, but it goes much deeper than that.

''We sell ourselves, pieces of our souls, because as painful as it sometimes can be, the joy of completion makes it all somehow bearable. The orgasmic ecstasy that results from the creation of something undeniably yours is its own justification.

''If life is pain, can art, which reflects life, be different? I don't know. I can't describe what it is that drives people like us to put ourselves through hell just to write a story or paint a lunarscape or create an ephemeral presence in a psychorama. It's a need of some sort, not many people have it. Perhaps they're better off not having it.

''But you and I are stuck. We do things that most people can't do. We create something we love and we sell it and we ask others to love it. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't. When they don't, it can be hard. Unendurably hard.

''Yet we do it anyway. Masochistic? Yes, I suppose we all have a little of that in our psych profiles. Every one of us is his own little ambulatory corporation of neuroses. Otherwise we wouldn't be here.

''People like Rosswell, you, myself,'' he waved a hand, ''so crave approval that we go to lengths to institutionalize ourselves so that we can get that drive flowing consistently enough to be able to offer ourselves up for sacrifice time and time again.

''Oz,'' said Beldone, taking the younger man by the shoulders, ''you don't have to kill yourself. You do that every time you sit down to paint. There!'' He pointed at the easel. ''There is your rebirth. Survive, Oz. Any way you can, *survive*! Nothing else matters.''

In all the world, no sparkle is brighter than the glisten of a tear.

''No.'' The writer stayed the artist's hand. ''No, Oz, don't wipe it away. Paint with it.''

He gave the younger man a hug and then he left.

Dr. Wu had left strict, programmed instructions that his patient was to rest. A mild sedation was prescribed. One that would coax and coddle into sleep. But sleep, for some, is just a way of wasting time. The artist had to paint.

For hour after hour Oz fought the gentle waves. The leaves took form, the thorns; the bloody flowers bowed their blooms in vivid splendor—incarnadine and carmine, a pulpy flush of damask and vermilion. And when the last brush clattered to the floor, the den went dim and Oz succumbed and slept.

An intern, tired and bleary-eyed, paid scant attention to the screens. If he had watched, there might have been a human hesitation. But as it was, the program ran on schedule.

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Having given birth, that night the painter died.

* * *

"You asked to see me?"

"Yes. To talk." A pause. The room was mirrored. Beldone's image was reflected from all angles in the den. The patient and his doctor could be seen from every view. "You like?" He made a sweeping gesture. "I set it up this way so I could see the many facets of myself." He thought of what he said to Oz the other night. "I see myself surrounded by hypocrisy."

Anne Cleaver wore a practiced look of nonchalance. She knew the answers and had known them for two days. The clues had been there all the time. He yearned for words but blocked them when they struggled to break free; she sought the clues but would not see them when they shouted to be seen.

"I had a dream last night," Beldone began. "And in this dream I had written my life's masterpiece." He paused. "It didn't sell."

"Eric?" Oz entered, stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry. . . ."

"Come in, Oz." The writer smiled. "I was merely unburdening some guilt. What's that you have there? Is it what I hope it is?"

Starkovski shrugged. "My so-called painting. I thought you might like to have it as a souvenir. I'm going home. I can't afford this elaborate therapy any more. In fact, I can't afford anything any more. Ah, well. . .I'll survive. The main thing is that I won't be killing myself with this artistic delusion I've been under. Never again. But that's all behind me. God, I haven't felt this good in I don't know how long! Like I haven't a care in the world. So you see? I'm cured."

Anne suddenly went cold. She should have warned him. Beldone was not taking it well. In a daze, he took the painting.

"So. There you are," Oz went on. "Eric, I feel uncomfortable with drawn-out farewells. There doesn't seem to be enough to say. I won't forget you."

"Oz, I—" but the painter was gone. "I won't forget you either," he finished weakly. "Something is terribly, terribly wrong. I have to stop him, Anne. I must—"

"It's too late. There's nothing you can do."

"Why?" Beldone looked lost. "What happened? I don't understand. What have you done to him?"

"His inability to function in his chosen medium was causing Oz unbearable psychic distress. As you yourself observed, he was a ripe candidate for a breakdown," she said calmly, trying to maintain a detached professional manner. "Especially in view of the fact that he could not afford extended treatment and that even if he could, artistic breakthrough was not projected with any reasonable degree of probability."

Beldone went pale. "My God! You've killed him!"

She smiled. "You're being melodramatic. All right. If you will, what we have done is to administer a sort of 'creative euthanasia.' His inability to accomplish his desire was causing him a great deal of pain. We removed the desire. Under

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the circumstances, it was the kindest thing to do."

His hands shook as he thrust the painting at her. "Look! Damn you, *look*!"

In his last hours as an artist Oz had achieved perfection: three withered, bleeding roses in a patch of barren ground; a sun, extinguished; a broken thorn. A child's vision of a demon's dream.

The silence screamed so loudly that she had to break it, yet her voice came slow. "H-how were we to know?"

The writer stared. "He'll paint again."

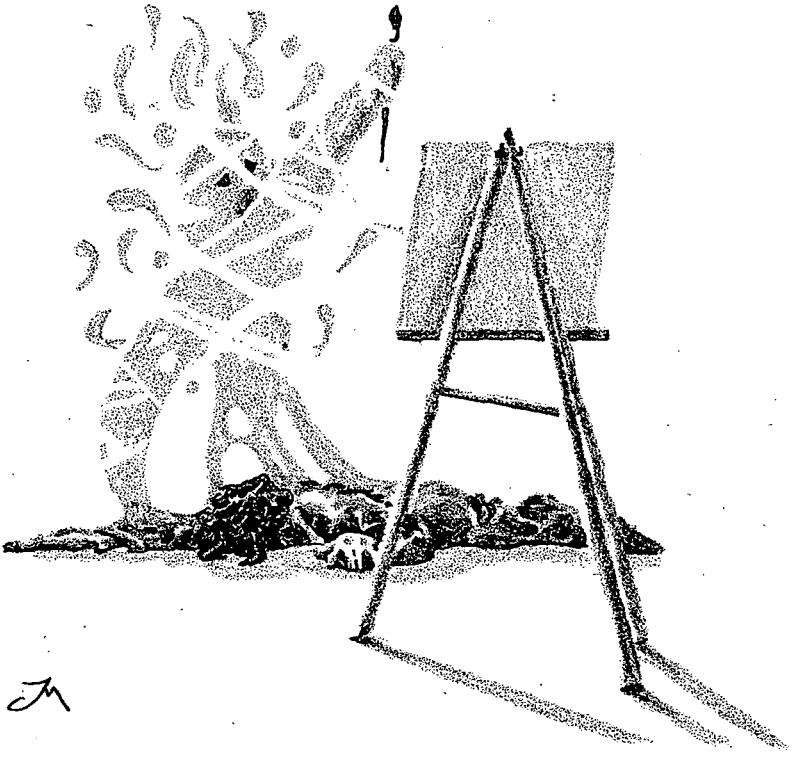
She shook her head. "He *can't*. We—"

"I *know* he'll paint again." And, quietly, he mumbled, "Dum spiro, spero. There are no words for what has happened here. There are no words for what that boy has done." His hand reached out and touched the roses. "There simply are no words."

He walked across the den, confronting the transcriber. He held his hand out and it hummed to life. He looked at Anne.

"I'll find the words," he said. "I'll find them!"

And he began to write. ★



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RAPPING OUT THE SPACE INDUSTRIES

LAST WEEK I went to a conference and for three days I listened to discussions of man's first contact with aliens; how to construct farms on asteroids; manufacturing processes in space; interior decorating in large space structures; and other such far-out subjects. It might have been a science-fiction convention—except that it wasn't. It was a meeting of the American Astronautical Society and the participants were engineers and scientists.

The only science-fiction writers besides myself were Joe Haldeman and G. Harry Stine—and Harry was there as a session chairman, in his capacity as an engineer-scientist, not as a fictioneer. No longer are we addicts of this Buck Rogers Stuff the chief laborers in the space vineyards.

It was an exciting week—at one point, while listening to a paper on asteroid colonies, Joe Haldeman and I turned toward each other and each began to say, "There's a novel in this paper alone!" after which we both collapsed into laughter when we realized we were talking about the same idea.

Obviously a conference like that is worth a column—but first, a commercial.

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I get letters. I get too many letters. I try to answer them all but I simply can't; and certainly I can't possibly carry on a lengthy correspondence, not even with those people I'd very much like to trade ideas with; nor can I send people copies of my data sources and bibliographies, or do term papers for students, or write lengthy essays "giving more details" on subjects I've touched on in these columns.

Thus two suggestions: First, if you enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope, there's a better chance I'll be able to send some kind of reply—although I can't promise to answer *every* letter, even when accompanied by an *sase*.

Second, if you want to talk with me about this Buck Rogers Stuff, catch me at a science-fiction convention. True, even that turns out to be difficult because there's so much going on at cons, so a final idea: Los Angeles is bidding for the World Science Fiction Convention in 1981. The Committee (of which I am a member) has decided that if we win the bid, we will put on a science fact symposium in which interested convention attendees will be able to discuss matters far-out with not only myself and other writers but also with a number of engineers and scientists working in the space sciences. Unlike many sf convention programs, this is intended to be a lengthy session with no automatic cut-off time, leaving plenty of opportunity for fanatics to get together.

If that appeals to you, send a dollar to: Los Angeles In '81 Committee, 734 South Ardmore, Los Angeles, California 90005. That buys you a membership in the LA in '81 Booster Club and you'll then be told what you can do to bring this about. Now back to our regularly scheduled program.

* * *

The AAS conference theme was "The Industrialization of Space—Planning for Profit at the High Frontier," and there were literally dozens of papers presented. Some were the usual bushwah by anthropologists and other social "scientists" who ought to have read some science fiction before rediscovering the wheel, but most were hard engineering studies: not whether we should go to space, but specifically how to get there and what to do upon arrival. Costs and schedules; modular building blocks; assembly of large structures; commercial products and optimum methods of making them; intermediate technology studies of roadblock or "show-stopper" problems and what to do about them—that sort of thing.

There were even a number of decent papers in the "soft science" areas. One NASA study on space-management techniques is a gold mine of information because rather than having a couple of anthropologists sit in a semi-dark room and dictate great thoughts, James Ragusa of the Payload Integration Office in NASA's Shuttle Project actually examined comparable situations for similarities to the space-management environment. His group found that the ten most similar situations to a space base were, in descending order of simi-

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larity:

1. Space Station
2. Oceanographic Research Ships
3. Antarctic Stations
4. Earthbound R&D Laboratories
5. The Ben Franklin Research Submarine
6. The Tektite II Laboratory
7. The Ninety-Day Space-Station Simulation Experiment
8. Nuclear Submarines
9. Sealab I
10. Skylab

From these they could identify personnel and management problems, examine over fifty possible organizational structures ranging from the traditional military to "participatory democracy," and come up with some preliminary work on management organizations appropriate to various space situations. Nobody thinks they have any final answers, but this was a sound study with identifiable criteria and variables.

Incidentally, they also examined the management structure of Star Trek and found it wanting. In fact, my major criticism of Ragusa's study is that NASA apparently thinks science fiction begins and ends with Buck Rogers and Star Trek, and the management study team has evidently never read any of the really serious science-fiction works that address themselves to the social environment of man in space. To be fair to NASA, they have probably made a far more thorough study of the relevant historical examples than has any sf author; but it does seem that a successful science-fiction writer may have at least as much chance of contributing a meaningful input as does a graduate student in anthropology.

(Lest it be said that I'm unduly harsh on anthropologists, let me quicky add that I'm certain their profession can make a contribution, but I do grow weary of speculative papers on human behavior in high-stress situations written by people who have obviously never read the diaries of polar explorers or the logs of research ships.)

The US approach to space exploration was one of building blocks; this was established by the Apollo program (*Mercury, Gemini, Apollo* and *Skylab* followed logically one on the next) and it's likely that this approach will continue. Given that assumption, what might we expect to see in the year 2000 in the way of space operations? One can only guess, of course; but one of the best guesses—in the sense that it is based on the building-block logic—is shown in Table One.

Now Table One is not supposed to be carved in granite; it's merely an estimate of what we *could* have by the year 2000. No one really knows what we will be doing—in fact, if we merely project present trends in US R&D efforts, the best guess is that by 2000 we'll be doing very little—but at least we have a starting point for discussion.

So what will all those people be doing in space?

* * *

There are two profitable lines for

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TABLE ONE

Space Operations in the Year 2000

Facility	Number Employed	Personnel Skills	Environment
Ground	3,000	Mix of engineering and maintenance	Similar to present
Low-Earth Orbit	50-100	Operations technicians	Relatively easy rotation to Earth
Moon Base	50-100	Mining and construction workers, engineering, maintenance, environment engineering.	Possibly some "permanent" personnel. Longer duration tours
Asteroid Exploration	5-10	Explorer-scientists	Long-term shipboard mission
Geo-Synchronous Orbit	6-12	Operations and maintenance	Temporary; may rotate to other space facilities rather than Earth
Space Manufacturing Facility	6,500	Construction, clerical, manufacturing, laboratory technicians, housekeeping, maintenance, etc.	Possibly permanent colonists

space development that we know reasonably well: materials that can be made only in space (or can be made there far more economically than here on Earth); and space-based solar power facilities. Of these, the Solar Power Satellite (SPS) concept has captured the most public attention. SPS offers a number of advantages: It is clean; it provides power at low operating costs (after the enormous initial capital investment); the fuel costs are nil and the fuel source is perpetual.

SPS is a high-technology industry, meaning that the US has a very good edge in international competition; the need for energy is unlikely

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to vanish in the near future; and energy and food exports make excellent sense for US international trade.

Moreover, nearly everyone is agreed that someday we'll have to use solar power; and a space-based system has many advantages over an Earth-based solar collector. Out in space there's no day-night cycle or cloudy weather. Solar power collectors have to be large—the solar constant of one kiloWatt per square meter is an absolute limit, so if you want a thousand-megaWatt facility (comparable to today's better coal-fired plants), you'll need at least a million square meters of surface area; and it's very much easier to build large structures in space than it is here on Earth. Down here you have both gravity and wind to contend with. Up there you have neither.

Thus the SPS concept is simple enough. A large collecting surface is deployed in space. The incident sunlight is converted to electricity, either directly by solar panels or by using mirrors to concentrate heat and then running a working fluid through a turbine. (Both concepts are under study. The turbines are not easy to build and operate in space, but they are at the moment far more efficient than solar panels; thus there's a trade-off between the simplicity of a direct-conversion system with a much larger surface area, or a smaller but more complex turbine system.) However the power is generated, it is then converted to microwaves of the proper frequency and beamed down to Earth.

The Earth-based part is a large antenna farm. The antenna elements are raised above ground, and the energy density in the system is low enough that cattle can graze on the land below, although no human in his right mind would want to live there. If birds wander into the beam, they grow warm and presumably will fly away. The beam density isn't enough to harm aircraft that stray into the system; and if the beam gets off center from the antenna farm, it shuts itself off through a rather simple control system.

Nearly all the waste heat from the system is left in space and what the SPS sends down to Earth is, or can be, sunlight that would have come to Earth anyway—thus the over-all heat balance of the Sun-Earth system is not changed.

That's the concept, which is—it's humorous that I can say this, but it's true—simple enough. Can we build it?

Surely. We know far more about the technology problems of SPS than we did about going to the Moon when John Kennedy gave us that task.

Is it economical?

That depends partly on one's definition of "economical." Certainly you will not get power from SPS to compete with $10-a-barrel oil. What we have to pay in international problems to keep oil at $10/bbl is something else again—and will oil stay at that price anyway? In the very long run we *must* have solar power because there just isn't that much oil left at any price; so the economic question is one of time as much as anything else.

Manufacture of materials in space is in much the same situation as

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SPS: We know what the problems are, and we know how to go about doing the job; we don't really know the costs or the profits to be made.

At the AAS meeting there were some first cuts made at answering these questions. Representative materials such as organics (urokinase in the example), films (silicon ribbons) and alloys (high-coercive strength magnets) were analyzed for market potential, probable sales price, cost of manufacture on Earth and cost of manufacture in space. The one discussed at the meeting was magnets, in which it was assumed that there was a market potential of 0.5% (½ a per cent) of the present purchases for very efficient magnets selling at $1500 a kilogram, a price some users already pay.

Now this type of analysis requires a lot of assumptions about costs-to-orbit, what facilities might be available in orbit, where raw materials might be found (if they can be mined on the Moon, the profits can increase; but there's not enough market potential to set up a Moon Base if that's *all* you mine, so how much of the "overhead" of a Moon Base must be charged to this particular operation?), and the like. The overall conclusion was that this space operation could be profitable with a return of about 13% on investment; not bad, but also not a very firm number.

You get similar results if you analyze other space processes. The "profits" are just too dependent on the numbers you assume. We don't know enough about the space environment and the costs of getting there.

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Note, though, that there are alternate routes. A German private-investment group known as OTRAG has recently flown the basic module of their proposed privately owned satellite-launching company, and they fully expect to be able to put payload in orbit by 1981 at costs that they say will be "market-oriented," which is to say at costs competitive with NASA's subsidized Shuttle. The OTRAG system will never be man-rated and is intended to be a routine "common carrier" for space packages: communications satellites, of course, but also a capability to send up raw materials for manufacturing in space, and fuel to bring down finished space products.

This is what leaves economic

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analyses of space operations in a confused state—but it is also why the whole field is so exciting. Consider: If there are space manufacturing operations that may be profitable by themselves, they are almost certainly going to be profitable in company with others. If the Solar Power Satellites are built, there will be sizeable communities of people in space. Many of the life-support problems will be solved. It doesn't cost much to add a manufacturing module to a space power station—that is, not much compared to the price of putting up the first station.

If you have a Moon Base to mine materials for the SPS, the addition of a capability to mine other minerals up there, where the gravity costs are so much less (it takes only a fraction of the fuel to get from Lunar surface to Lunar orbit as compared to going from Earth to Earth orbit), will not be prohibitively expensive.

Moreover, there's a *very* good chance that all the oxygen required for space operations can come from the Moon. At the AAS meeting, Professor G. K. O'Neill, the Princeton physics professor of O'Neill Colony fame, showed movies of a working model of his mass-driver—a device that might be used to launch Lunar materials into Lunar orbit without using rockets at all. The concept is old to science fiction, of course: electric sleds that go across the Lunar surface fast enough to give their payloads Lunar escape velocity; but it's not ours alone any more. The engineers are hard at work designing them and building test models.

With a working Moon Base and a working mass-driver on the Moon, a number of space operations are *clearly* profitable.

With a working Solar Power Satellite, manufacturing is profitable. If manufacturing operations in space become routine, the SPS concept comes closer to being competitive with present-day power generation.

Meanwhile, one group of economists has identified $673 billion in spinoff benefits from past space activities. This includes twenty new services; 150 new products; 100 new processes; and 35 product upgradings. It does not include incalculables such as Earthwatch pollution monitoring. Very few of these benefits were expected when space research began. Most weren't even dreamed of.

You could easily say that NASA was one of the few—perhaps the only—successes of the US government in the past twenty years, and at no time did space's share exceed 2% of the government's overall budget. (For that matter, ask anyone when was the last time he felt truly proud of the United States and the likelihood is high that he'll say July 20, 1969. "Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed.")

* * *

Which brings us to another part of the AAS discussion: What, if anything, is government's proper role in space development? Speakers advocated everything from total abandonment by government to the creation of a Space Exploitation Authority along the lines of TVA.

The anti-government hardliners

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have two points: Government is inefficient and will waste the money; or space development will make government so powerful that we'll never escape its snares. Certainly we all of us have misgivings about increasing government power, and anything that sends more money flowing through Washington creates new layers of bureaucracy; but one wonders how we'll ever get to Table One without government activity.

After all, the most violent advocates of NASA space research aren't asking for more than the 2% the space budget had back in Apollo days. It's not really much money compared to HEW or Defense, and if we can all agree that the Federal budget ought to be cut, surely there's room for the cuts in programs that don't have so many obvious benefits? It isn't as though the money is likely to be left in the hands of taxpayers if it's not spent on space.

Then too, Adam Smith, hardly an advocate of the Welfare State, said that there are some enterprises which are so expensive and have so many benefits to the general good (without much chance of profit for individual investors) that they are the proper activity of the central government. He was thinking of projects such as harbors and canals but I doubt he would have disapproved of the voyages of HMS *Beagle* or *Challenger*.

Exploration by US teams: Lewis and Clark, Zebulon Pike, Fremont, polar exploration teams, the Hydrographic and Geographic bureaus and the like—all these are old traditions in this country. Their benefits are pretty obvious; and providing access to space, developing basic technology, answering some of the unknown questions that keep us from making good profit-risk estimates about space operations—these seem to me to be very proper activities for Washington to undertake. More proper, in fact, than many of the things the federal government does "for us" now.

I realize this is an open question worth a lot more discussion. The opening of the "high frontier" could be the most important activity, excluding religion, in the history of mankind. How we go about it can hardly be trivial. On the other hand, if we don't do it at all—and it looks as though we can't without considerably more early development work than profit-making companies will undertake—the loss may then be the most important event in our history.

The problem with private investment in space is that right now the front-end costs are very high and the return is not really predictable. I can have faith that the spinoff technologies will be valuable, but I can't guarantee they'll be valuable to those who invest the money. A magnet-manufacturing firm just isn't equipped to make profits from new management techniques, more efficient use of electrical power, better vacuum seals, higher yields from algae farms or many of the totally unexpected benefits space development may not merely give us but *require* as a condition for getting out there.

Or take Earth-observation satellites as an example. One of their major benefits was in the hundred

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of billions we did *not have to spend* on weapons: Through the use of observation satellites we were able to obtain much better intelligence estimates of Soviet strategic strength than we could have otherwise, and thus we did not have to construct weapons to counter possible threats. How can any private firm profit from that? (Oh, sure, private companies, as well as each of us, profited from the lower taxes; but such general-good benefits can hardly be financed through private contributions, not in this real world we live in.)

Lest this paper become one of those rambling essays rediscovering the wheel, let's leave the subject. It's one I'll be glad to discuss in person at, say, the Los Angeles in '81 Convention.

* * *

There was at the AAS meeting a small contingent of the opposition. "Environmentalists," various "concerned" groups, some of whom say flatly that "humanity hasn't earned the right to go to space"; others who are frankly and openly against the whole idea of "progress" and want us to use our energies in "appropriate technology" or want the world to have universally and equally shared poverty rather than differentials between wealthy and poor nations.

Dr. Philomena Grodzka of the Lockheed Missiles and Space Company gave what I thought was the best reply of the symposium when she observed that in her view, the appropriate-technology people were in effect "trying to preserve as many mind-stultifying jobs as possible," and that world society, given the growth of bureaucracy and unions and large organizations, was "far more in danger of creeping feudalism than of any new technology."

There were others, though, who had more cogent objections to space industries. Their motivations are similar to those of the first group but at least their opposition is expressed in technical, rather than poetic, terms. For example, they say that we cannot have a closed-system ecology in space; we don't even know enough about ecology on Earth to set one up here. How, then, are we to have complete recycling in space colonies and Moon Bases?

As I said above, many of those objections come from groups which obviously do not want the answers to their questions: They ask to taunt, not for information. Still, answers are coming forth.

The single most exciting paper in the symposium, according to both Joe Haldeman and myself, was "Use of Outer Planet Satellites and Asteroids as Sources of Raw Materials for Life-Support Systems," by Peter M. Molton and Ted E. Devine, both of Batelle Northwest Laboratories in Richland, Washington.

This paper analyzed requirements for large space operations. It examined the costs of supplying space-manufacturing facilities from Earth and concluded the obvious: We can't afford to ship up all that food and water for "once-through" use.

They then looked realistically at

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recycling and concluded that we don't yet know how to manage that with sufficient efficiency. They examined what's likely to be available on the Moon, and from best evidence, there's simply not enough carbon, hydrogen and nitrogen for self-sufficiency; certainly not enough to supply an expanding industrial base.

Given the realities of rocket transport, simply going out to the asteroid belt—where it is quite likely that the missing elements are found in abundance—won't do the job either. The two-way transport costs are too high. Therefore, out in the asteroid belt there will have to be facilities not only for mining and refining compounds vital to the space and Lunar bases, but also for manufacturing the rocket fuels to get these materials from the belt to Earth orbit.

This is possible but it requires relatively permanent asteroid stations—and those must be supplied with food and water. Can we farm the asteroids for self-sufficiency?

Molton and Devine then proceeded to design an asteroid farm. It consists of a big mirror shaped something like a saucer. By big they don't mean enormous—only about 80 meters in radius. On top of this sits a cup-shaped dome about 36 meters in radius, having as a cap an overhead reflector. Various support systems for the planets—even on Ceres the gravity is only about 4% that of the Earth's—were examined. Tests were made. The costs of transporting various soil enrichments, trace elements, fertilizers, etc., from Earth to the Ceres base for use in the "farms" were considered.

The whole system was then analyzed in terms of costs and benefits to near-Earth space activities, building up this picture of the future:

Earth exports information, entertainment and the like, with *some* very high-value material exports. In return, Earth receives an almost unlimited supply of rare metals, minerals and space-processed, high-cost products.

The Lunar Base does support the near-Earth satellites (it takes less fuel, and therefore costs less, to go from the Moon-to-Earth orbit than from Earth-to-Earth orbit), exporting some finished products, raw materials and oxygen. The Moon Base is also the main support supply-line for an asteroid colony. The asteroid bases import oxygen and support technology from the Moon. It is even possible that many of the personnel in the asteroid system are actually permanent residents on the Moon, taking a ten-year tour of duty out in the belt. The asteroid bases export kerogen (carbonaceous chrondritic material containing carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, and oxygen, and known to good probability to be relatively plentiful in the asteroid belt).

One can even see the sources of future conflict here: The asteroid bases have everything the Moon colony does, plus kerogens. All they lack are quick access to the satellite facilities near Earth and the more intense solar energy at Earth orbit. A tendency to want independence is predictable.

There's a lot more in this paper,

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all hard data. No, of course Molton and Devine haven't "solved" all the problems of making space colonies self-sufficient, nor do they claim to have. They *have* shown one possible route and demonstrated that with some reasonable assumptions about the value of space-processed materials, the whole operation can be profitable: Earth puts up the money for the initial development and obtains an unlimited supply of rare metals and such in return.

There were other such papers, and the contrast between the careful work of the engineers and scientists—showing their assumptions, stating the unknowns in their work and getting their math right—the contrast between them and the opponents of the space program couldn't be greater.

Example: My one-time debate opponent, John Holt: "If L-5 is a point where the gravitational fields of earth and moon cancel each other out, any movement toward one would lead it to further movement in that direction, there being no correcting or opposing force . . . it would be hard for those on earth when it (the space colony) did get there." A neat demonstration of ignorance of high-school physics.

Or the biologist who "proves" that "the people who can conceive of this clever solution (space colonies) cannot be part of it" and that those who will go to space won't be smart enough to live there; thus, he says, he has shown us "the workings of a Reductio ad Paradoxium—let's call it RAP for short . . . RAP overrides all other approaches . . . O'Neill's colonies run right up against a political *rap-out*. There is no need to look further into technical feasibility once we understand the political rap-out." And he is—I am not joking—quite incensed that we would waste any more time on studying the technology of space since he has proved that space colonies are "rapped out."

Silly . . . and yet not too different from the acts of faith which we in science fiction professed in the early days. On faith and imagination we worked toward a goal that most of us didn't really understand and toward which only a few could make any direct technical contribution.

Part of our job in the old days was answering the silly arguments of those of opposing faith; was keeping the flame burning while others went out and gathered hard data.

That time has come. The data are flowing in and the hard analysis begins. We can make use of much of that. It happens that I am at this moment expanding and revising a story of an asteroid colony (*Bind Your Sons to Exile*, a short version of which appeared in a now-defunct magazine) that will be published by Ace next fall—with forty interior illustrations by a major artist yet! If you think you recognize in that book some of the concepts I got from Molton and Devine, you'll be quite correct.

The scientists are doing the designs for us.

When it comes to space industrialization and near-term space technology, we science-fiction writers have to make a readjustment.

It's not ours alone any more. ★

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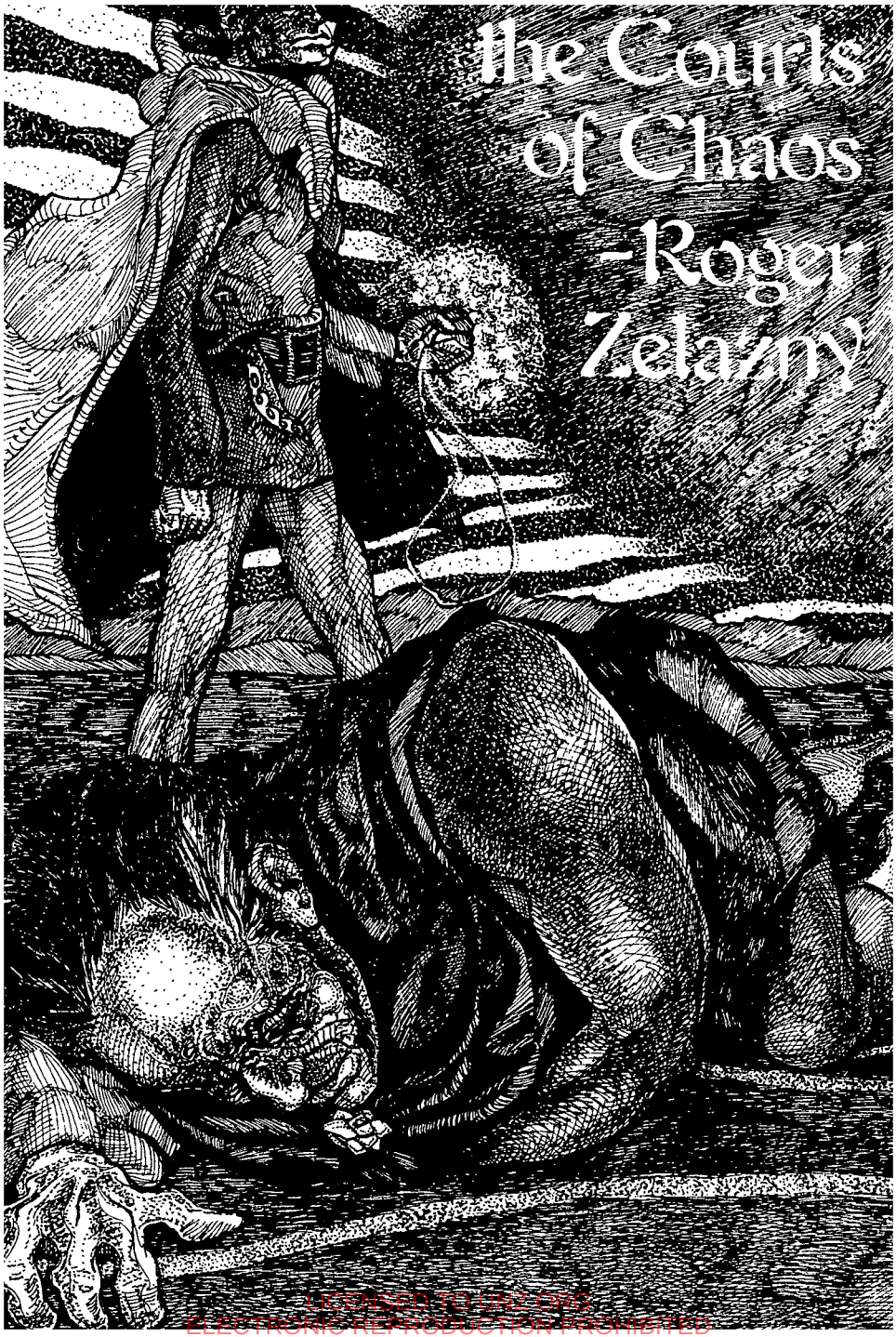

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Dad came and went. He returned to Amber long enough to provide instructions concerning the coming conflict with the Courts of Chaos, and then he rode off again.

In a strange reenactment of my most recent experiences in Tir-na Nog'th, Benedict and Dara were summoned to the throne room by Martin. There, Benedict lost his new arm to a ghostly me, just as the ghostly Benedict had lost it to the real me in the city in the sky.

Martin had summoned Dara by means of a Trump the like of which I had never before seen. I learned that morning that his set had been made by Merlin—my son by Dara—of whose existence I had not been aware.

While I was still reeling from this knowledge Dara began giving orders in Dad's name, producing his signet to back them up. This was too much. I got in touch with Fiona at the place of the primal Pattern, where I'd guessed Dad might have gone. I was right. He was there. I learned from Fiona that he was about to risk his life in an attempt to repair the Pattern.

I had Fi trump me through. I seized the Jewel of Judgment from Dad and was set to try repairing the Pattern myself when he and Dworkin were able to stop me. Dad had a talk with me then. He had decided, he told me, that he wanted me to be his successor, with Dara as my queen.

I made what I think was one of my wiser decisions and turned him down. He sent me back to Amber then, with instructions to prepare for a long journey and await his presence outside the city.

I did this, and he got in touch with me later—creating a red bird from my blood to bear me the Jewel when he was finished with it. Then he bade me ride for the Courts of Chaos. I rode as I had never ridden before, and the bird did finally bring me the Jewel. By this, I knew that Dad had finished his attempt to repair the Pattern and might well be dead. Also, he might well have failed, in which case the very fabric of existence was being unraveled slowly at my back.

With these cheerful thoughts, I continued through Shadow toward the Courts of Chaos, encountering my brother Brand, who tried to force me to give him the Jewel on our first meeting and tried to talk me out of it on our second. Neither effort succeeded.

Then Brand ambushed me, slaying Star, my mount. He almost nailed me, too, but was attacked by my red familiar bird and had to depart. I continued on by foot, passing through a strange valley which seemed to mark the end of all order. I haven't decided yet whether the greatest pest in the place was a nihilistic bird who wanted to convert me or a jackal who only wanted to eat me.

I survived both of them and made it to a plateau which I hoped lay near my goal. Alas, it did not. Then I did the only thing I saw left to do. Assuming the worst—that Dad had failed and all the Shadow was now being engulfed by waves of Chaos—I strove with my remaining strength to inscribe a new Pattern.

I succeeded, too, only to have the Jewel snatched from me by Brand, who promptly vanished with it.

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X.

As I LAY THERE HURTING, I had visions of Brand appearing on the battlefield where the forces of Amber and Chaos fought, Jewel pulsing about his neck. Apparently his control over it was sufficient, as he saw it, to enable him to turn things against us. I saw him lashing out with lightning bolts among our troops. I saw him summoning great winds and hailstorms to strike at us. I almost wept. All of this, when he could still redeem himself by coming in on our side. Just winning was not enough for him now, though. He had to win for himself, and on his own terms. And I? I had failed. I had thrown up a Pattern against the Chaos, a thing I had never thought I could do. Yet this would be as nothing if the battle was lost and Brand returned and wiped out my work. To have come this close, passing through everything that I had, and then to fail here . . . it made me want to cry "Injustice!" though I knew the universe did not run in accordance with my notions of equity. I gnashed my teeth and spat some dirt I had mouthed. I had been charged by our father to take the Jewel to the place of battle. I had almost made it.

A sense of strangeness came over me then. Something was calling for my attention. What?

The silence.

The raging winds and the thunder had ceased. The air was still. In fact, the air felt cool and fresh. And on the other side of my eyelids, I knew that there was light.

I opened my eyes. I saw a sky of a bright, uniform white. I blinked, I turned my head. There was something off to my right . . . .

A tree. A tree stood where I had planted the staff I had cut from old Ygg. It was already far taller than the staff itself had been. I could almost see it growing. And it was green with leaves and white with a sprinkling of buds; a few blossoms had opened. From that direction the breeze brought me a faint and delicate scent which offered me some comfort.

I felt along my sides. I did not seem to have any broken ribs, though my guts still felt knotted from the kick I had taken. I rubbed my eyes with my knuckles and ran my hands through my hair. I sighed heavily then and rose to one knee.

Turning my head, I regarded the prospect. The plateau was the same, yet somehow not the same. It was still bare but was no longer harsh. Likely an effect of the new illumination. No, there was more to it than that . . . .

I had continued to turn, completing my scanning of the horizon. It was not the same place where I had commenced my walk. There were differences both subtle and gross: altered rock formations, a dip where there had been a rise, a new texture to the stone beneath and near me, in the distance what appeared to be soil. I stood and it seemed that now, from somewhere, I caught the scent of the sea. This place had an entirely different feeling to it than the one to which I had mounted—so long ago, it seemed. It was too much of a change for that storm to have wrought. It reminded me of something.

I sighed again, there at the Pat-

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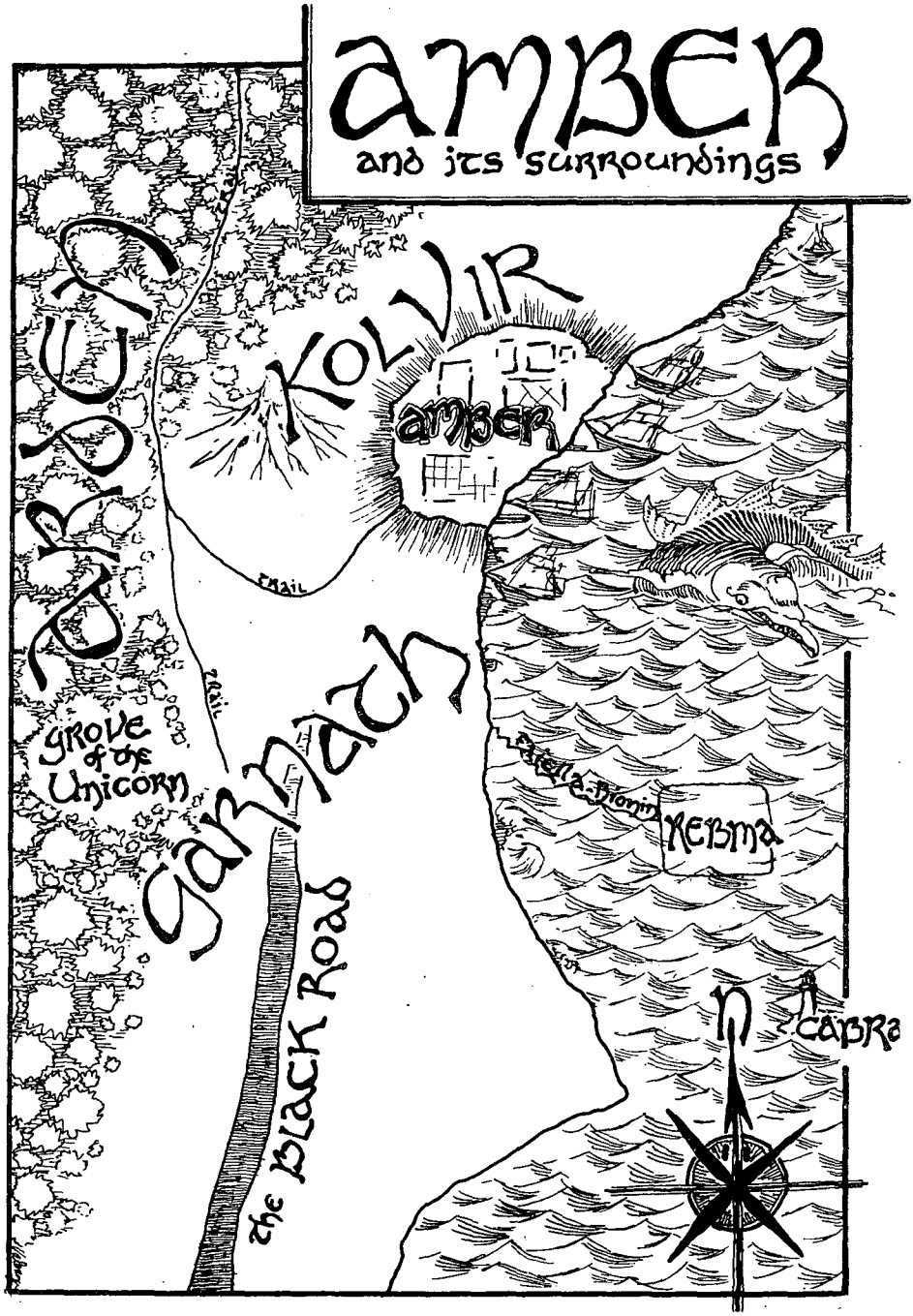

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tern's center, and continued to consider my surroundings. Somehow, in spite of myself, my despair was slipping away and a feeling of—"refreshment" seems somehow the best word—was rising within me. The air was so clean and sweet, and the place had a new, unused feeling about it. I—

Of course. It was like the place of the primal Pattern. I turned back to the tree and regarded it again, higher already. Like, yet unlike . . . . There was something now in the air, the ground, the sky. This was a new place. A new primal Pattern. Everything about me then was a result of the Pattern in which I stood.

I suddenly realized that I was feeling more than refreshment. It was now a sense of elation, a kind of joy, that was moving through me. This was a clean, fresh place and I was somehow responsible for it.

Time passed. I just stood there watching the trees, looking around me, enjoying the euphoria that had come over me. Here was some kind of victory, anyway—until Brand came back to wipe it out.

Suddenly I was sober again. I had to stop Brand, I had to protect this place. I was at the center of a Pattern. If this one behaved like the other, I could use its power to project myself anywhere I desired. I could use it to go and join the others now.

I dusted myself off. I loosened my blade in the scabbard. Things might not be as hopeless as they had seemed earlier. I had been told to convey the Jewel to the place of battle. So Brand had done it for me; it would still be there. I would simply have to go and take it back from him, somehow, to make things turn the way they were supposed to have fallen.

I looked all around me. I would have to return here, to investigate this new situation at another time, if I survived what was to come. There was mystery here. It hung in the air and drifted on the breeze. It could take ages to unravel what had occurred when I had drawn the new Pattern.

I saluted the tree. It seemed to stir as I did so. I adjusted my rose and pushed it back into shape. It was time to move again. There was a thing I had yet to do.

I lowered my head and closed my eyes. I tried to recall the lay of the land before the final abyss at the Courts of Chaos. I saw it then, beneath that wild sky, and I peopled it with my relatives, with troops. I seemed to hear the sounds of a distant battle as I did this. The scene adjusted itself, came clearer. I held the vision an instant longer, then charged the Pattern to take me there.

. . . A moment later, it seemed, I stood upon a hilltop beside a plain, a cold wind whipping my cloak about me. The sky was that crazy, turning, stippled thing I remembered from last time—half-black, half psychedelic rainbows. There were unpleasant fumes in the air. The black road was off to the right now, crossing that plain and passing beyond it over the abyss toward that knighted citadel, firefly gleams flickering about it. Gauzy bridges drifted in the air, extending from afar in that darkness, and strange

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forms traveled upon them as well as upon the black road. Below me on the field was what seemed to be the main concentration of troops. At my back, I heard something other than Time's wingéd chariot.

Turning toward what must have been north by a succession of previous reckonings regarding its course, I beheld the advance of that devil-storm through distant mountains, flashing and growling, coming on like a sky-high glacier.

So I had not stopped it with the creation of a new Pattern. It seemed that it had simply passed by my protected area and would continue on until it got to wherever it was going. Hopefully then, the thing would be succeeded by whatever constructive impulses were now spreading outward from the new Pattern, with the reimposition of order throughout the places of Shadow. I wondered how long it would take for the storm to get here.

I heard the sound of hoofs and turned, drawing my blade . . . .

A horned rider on a great black horse was bearing down upon me, something like firelight glowing in his eyes.

I adjusted my position and waited. He seemed to have descended from one of the gauzy roadways which had drifted in this direction. We were both fairly far removed from the main scene of action. I watched as he mounted the hill. Good horse, that. Nice chest. Where the hell was Brand? I wasn't looking for just any fight.

I watched the rider as he came on, the crooked blade in his right hand. I repositioned myself as he

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moved in to cut me down. When he swung, I was ready with a parry that pulled his arm within reach. I caught hold of it and dragged him from his mount.

"That rose . . ." he said as he fell to the ground. I do not know what else he might have said because I cut his throat, and his words and everything else about him were lost with the fiery slash.

I whirled then, drawing Grayswandir away, sprinted several paces and had hold of the black charger's bridle. I spoke with the horse to calm him and led him away from the flames. After a couple of minutes we were on better terms, and I mounted.

He was skittish at first, but I just had him pace the hilltop lightly while I continued to observe. The forces of Amber appeared to be on the offense. Smouldering corpses were all over the field. The main force of our enemies was drawn back onto a height near the lip of the abyss. Lines of them, not yet broken but hard pressed, were falling back slowly toward it. On the other hand, more troops were crossing that abyss and joining the others who held the heights. Estimating their growing numbers and their position quickly, I judged that these might be readying an offense of their own. Brand was nowhere in sight.

Even if I had been rested and wearing armor, I would have had second thoughts about riding down and joining in the fray. My job right now was to locate Brand. I doubted that he would be directly involved in the fighting. I looked off to the sides of the battle proper, seeking a lone figure. No . . . perhaps the far side of the field. I would have to circle to the north. There was too much that I could not see to the west.

I turned my mount and made my way down the hill. It would be so pleasant to collapse, I decided. Just to fall down in a heap and sleep. I sighed. Where the hell was Brand?

I reached the bottom of the hill and turned to cut through a culvert. I needed a better view—

"Lord Corwin of Amber!"

He was waiting for me as I rounded a bend in the depression, a big, corpse-colored guy with red hair and a horse to match. He wore coppery armor with greenish tracings, and he sat facing me, still as a statue.

"I saw you on the hilltop," he said. "You are not mailed, are you?"

I slapped my chest.

He nodded sharply. Then he reached up, first to his left shoulder, then to his right, then to his sides, opening fastenings upon his breastplate. When he had them undone, he removed it, lowered it toward the ground on his left side and let it fall. He did the same with his greaves.

"I have long wanted to meet you," he said. "I am Borel. I do not want it said that I took unfair advantage of you when I killed you."

Borel . . . the name was familiar. Then I remembered. He had Dara's respect and affection. He had been her fencing teacher, a master of the blade. Stupid, though, I saw. He had forfeited my respect by removing his armor. Battle is not a game,

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and I had no desire to make myself available to any presumptuous ass who thought otherwise. Especially a skilled ass, when I was feeling beat. If nothing else, he could probably wear me down.

"Now we shall resolve a matter which has long troubled me," he said.

I replied with a quaint vulgarism, wheeled my black and raced back the way I had come. He gave chase immediately.

As I passed back along the culvert, I realized that I did not have a sufficient lead. He would be upon me in a matter of moments with my back all exposed, to cut me down or force me to fight. However, while limited, my choices included a little more than that.

"Coward!" he cried. "You flee combat! Is this the great warrior of whom I have heard so much?"

I reached up and unfastened my cloak. At either hand, the culvert's lip was level with my shoulders, then my waist.

I rolled out of the saddle to my left, stumbled once and found my footing. The black continued on. I moved to my right, facing the draw.

Catching my cloak in both hands, I swung it in a reverse-veronica maneuver a second or two before Borel's head and shoulders came abreast of me. It swept over him, drawn blade and all, muffling his head and slowing his arms.

I kicked then, hard. I was aiming for his head, but I caught him on the left shoulder. He was spilled from his saddle, and his horse, too, went by.

Drawing Grayswandir, I leaped after him. I caught him just as he had brushed my cloak aside and was struggling to rise. I skewered him where he sat and saw the startled expression on his face as the wound began to flame.

"Oh, basely done!" he cried. "I had hoped for better of thee!"

"This isn't exactly the Olympic Games," I said, brushing some sparks from my cloak.

I chased down my horse then and mounted. This took me several minutes. As I continued on northward, I achieved higher ground. From there I spotted Benedict directing the battle, and in a draw far to the rear, I caught a glimpse of Julian at the head of his troops from Arden. Benedict was apparently holding them in reserve.

I kept going, toward the advancing storm, beneath the half-dark, half-painted, revolving sky. I soon reached my goal, the highest hill in sight, and began to mount it. I halted several times on the way up, to look back.

I saw Deirdre in black armor, swinging an axe; Llewella and Flora were among the archers. Fiona was nowhere in sight. Gérard was not there either. Then I saw Random on horseback, swinging a heavy blade, leading an assault toward the enemy's high ground. Near him was a knight clad in green whom I did not recognize. The man swung a mace with deadly efficiency. He wore a bow upon his back and held a quiver of gleaming arrows at his hip.

The sounds of the storm came louder as I reached the summit of my hill. The lightning flickered with the regularity of a neon tube and the rain sizzled down, a

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fiberglass curtain that had now passed over the mountains.

Below me, both beasts and men—and more than a few beastmen—were woven in knots and strands of battle. A cloud of dust hung over the field. Assessing the distribution of forces, however, it did not appear to me that the growing forces of the enemy could be pushed much farther. In fact, it seemed that it was just about time for the counterattack. They appeared to be ready up in their craggy places, and just waiting for the order.

I was about a minute and a half off. They advanced, sweeping down the slope, reinforcing their lines, pushing our troops back, driving ahead. And more were arriving from beyond the dark abyss. Our own troops began a reasonably orderly retreat. The enemy pressed harder, and when things seemed about ready to be turned into a rout, an order must have been given.

I heard the sound of Julian's horn, and shortly thereafter I saw him astride Morgenstern, leading the men of Arden onto the field. This balanced the opposing forces almost exactly and the noise level rose and rose while the sky turned above us.

I watched the conflict for perhaps a quarter of an hour, as our own forces slowly withdrew across the field. Then I saw a one-armed figure on a fiery striped horse suddenly appear atop a distant hill. He bore a raised blade in his hand and he was faced away from me, toward the west. He stood unmoving for several long moments. Then he lowered the blade.

I heard trumpets in the west, and at first I saw nothing. Then a line of cavalry came into view. I started. For a moment, I thought Brand was there. Then I realized it was Bleys leading his troops to strike at the enemy's exposed flank.

And suddenly our troops in the field were no longer retreating. They were holding their line. Then they were pressing forward.

Bleys and his riders came on, and I realized that Benedict had the day again. The enemy was about to be ground to pieces.

Then a cold wind swept over me from out of the north, and I looked that way again.

The storm had advanced considerably. It must have started moving faster just recently. And it was darker now than it had been, with brighter flashes and louder roars. And this cold, wet wind was increasing in intensity.

I wondered then . . . would it simply sweep over the field like an annihilating wave and that be that? What of the effects of the new Pattern? Would these follow, to restore everything? Somehow I doubted this. If this storm smashed us, I'd a feeling we would stay smashed. It would require the force of the Jewel to permit us to ride it out until order was restored. And what would be left if we survived it? I simply could not guess.

So what was Brand's plan? What was he waiting for? What was he going to do?

I looked out over the battlefield once more . . . .

Something.

In a shadowy place on the heights where the enemy had regrouped,

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been reinforced, and down which it had stormed . . . something.

A tiny flash of red . . . I was sure I had seen it.

I kept watching, waiting. I had to see it again, to pinpoint it . . . .

A minute passed. Two, perhaps . . .

There!

And again.

I wheeled the black charger. It looked possible to make it around the enemy's near flank and up to that supposedly vacant height. I raced down the hill and began that course.

It had to be Brand with the Jewel. He had chosen a good, safe spot, from which he commanded a view of the entire battlefield as well as the approaching storm. From there, he could direct its lightning into our troops as the front advanced. He would signal a retreat at the proper moment, hit us with the storm's strange furies, then sidetrack the thing to bypass the side he was backing. It seemed the simplest and most effective use of the Jewel under the circumstances.

I would have to get close fast. My control of the stone was greater than his, but it diminished with distance, and he would have the Jewel on his person. My best bet would be to charge right into him, to get within control range at all costs, take over command of the stone and use it against him. But he might have a bodyguard up there with him. That troubled me, because dealing with it could slow me disastrously. And if he did not, what was to prevent him from teleporting himself away if the going got too rough? Then what could I do? I would have to start all over, hunting him again. I wondered whether I could use the Jewel to keep him from transporting himself: I did not know. I resolved to try.

It might not have been the best of plans, but it was the only one I had. There was no longer time to plot.

As I rode, I saw that there were others headed for that height, also. Random, Deirdre and Fiona, mounted and accompanied by eight horsemen, had made their way through the enemy lines, with a few other troops—friends or foes, I could not tell, maybe both—riding hard behind them. The knight clad in green seemed to be moving the fastest, gaining on them. I did not recognize him—or her, as the case might be. I did not doubt the objective of the vanguard, however—not with Fiona there. She must have detected Brand's presence and be leading the others to him. A few drops of hope fell upon my heart. She might be able to neutralize Brand's powers, or minimize them. I leaned forward, still bearing to my left, hurrying my horse along. The sky kept turning. The wind whistled about me. A terrific clap of thunder rolled by. I did not look back.

I was racing them. I did not want them to get there before me, but I feared that they would. The distance was just too great.

If only they would turn and see me coming, they would probably wait. I wished there had been some way of giving them a sign of my presence earlier. I cursed the fact that the Trumps no longer worked.

I began shouting. I screamed after them, but the wind blew my words away and the thunder rolled

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over them.

"Wait for me! Damn it! It's Corwin!"

Not even a glance in my direction could I get from them.

I passed the nearest engagements and rode along the enemy's flank, out of range of missiles and arrows. They seemed to be retreating faster now and our troops were spreading out over a larger area. Brand must be getting ready to strike. Part of the rotating sky was covered by a dark cloud which had not been above the field minutes before.

I turned toward my right, behind the retreating forces, racing on toward those hills the others were already mounting.

The sky continued to darken as I neared the foot of the hills, and I feared for my kinsmen. They were getting too close to him. He would have to do something. Unless Fiona was strong enough to stop him . . . .

The horse reared and I was thrown to the ground at the blinding flash which had occurred before me. The thunder cracked before I hit the earth.

I lay there for several moments, dazed. The horse had run off, was perhaps fifty meters away, before he halted and began to move about uncertainly. I rolled onto my stomach and looked up the long slope. The other riders were also down. Their group had apparently been struck by the discharge. Several were moving, more were not. None had yet risen. Above them, I saw the red glow of the Jewel, back beneath an underhang, brighter and steadier now, and the shadowy outline of the figure who wore it.

I began crawling forward, upward and to my left. I wanted to get out of line of sight with that figure before I risked rising. It would take too long to reach him crawling, and I was going to have to skirt the others now, because his attention would be with them.

I made my way carefully, slowly, using every bit of cover in sight, wondering whether the lightning would be striking in the same place again soon—and if not, when he would begin pulling disaster down upon our troops. Any minute now, I judged. A glance back showed me our forces spread over the far end of the field, with the enemy pulled back and coming this way. Before too long, in fact, it seemed I might have them to worry about, too.

I made it into a narrow ditch and wormed my way south for perhaps ten meters. Out again then on the far side, to take advantage of a rise, then some rocks.

When I raised my head to take stock of the situation, I could no longer see the glow of the Jewel. The cleft from which it had shone was blocked by its own eastern shoulder of stone.

I kept crawling, though, near to the lip of the great abyss itself, before I bore to my right once more. I reached a point where it seemed safe to rise, and I did so. I kept expecting another flash, another thunderclap—nearby or on the field—but none came. I began to wonder why not. I reached out, trying to sense the presence of the Jewel, but I could not. I hurried toward the place where I had seen the glow.

I glanced back over the abyss to

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be sure that no new menaces were approaching from that direction. I drew my blade. When I reached my goal, I stayed close to the escarpment and worked my way northward. I dropped low when I came to its edge and peered around.

There was no red glow. No shadowy figure either. The stony recess appeared to be empty. There was nothing suspicious anywhere in the vicinity. Could he have teleported again? And if so, why?

I rose and passed about the rocky rise. I continued moving in that direction. I tried once more to feel the Jewel, and this time I made a faint contact with it—somewhere off to my right and above, it seemed.

Silent, wary, I moved that way. Why had he left his shelter? He had been perfectly situated for what he had been about. Unless . . . .

I heard a scream and a curse. Two different voices. I began to run.

XI.

I PASSED THE NICHE and kept going. Beyond it there was a natural trail winding upward. I mounted this.

I could see no one as yet, but my sense of the Jewel's presence grew stronger as I moved. I thought that I heard a single footfall from off to my right and I whirled in that direction, but there was no one in sight. The Jewel did not feel that near either, so I continued on.

As I neared the top of the rise, the black drop of Chaos hanging behind, I heard voices. I could not distinguish what was being said, but the words were agitated.

I slowed as I neared the crest, lowered myself, and peered around the side of a rock.

Random was a small distance ahead of me and Fiona was with him, as were Lords Chantris and Feldane. All, save Fiona, held weapons as if ready to use them, but they stood perfectly still. They were staring toward the edge of things—a shelf of rock slightly above their level and perhaps fifteen meters distant—the place where the abyss began.

Brand stood in that place, and he was holding Deirdre before him. She was unhelmed, her hair blowing wild, and he had a dagger at her throat. It appeared that he had already cut her slightly. I dropped back.

I heard Random say softly, "Is there nothing more you can do, Fi?"

"I can hold him here," he said, "and at this range, I can slow his efforts at weather control. But that is all. He's got some attunement with it and I do not. He also has proximity going for him. Anything else I might try, he can counter."

Random gnawed his lower lip.

"Put down your weapons," Brand called out. "Do it now, or Deirdre's dead."

"Kill her," Random said, "and you lose the only thing that's keeping you alive. Do it, and I'll show you where I'll put my weapon."

Brand muttered something under his breath. Then, "Okay. I will start by mutilating her."

Random spat.

"Come on!" he said. "She can regenerate as well as the rest of us. Find a threat that means something,

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or shut up and fight it out!''

Brand was still. I thought it better not to reveal my presence. There must be something I could do. I ventured another look, mentally photographing the terrain before I dropped back. There were some rocks way off to the left, but they did not extend far enough. I saw no way that I might sneak up on him.

''I think we are going to have to rush him and chance it,'' I heard Random say. ''I don't see anything else. Do you?''

Before anyone answered him, a strange thing occurred. The day began to grow brighter.

I looked all about for the source of the illumination, then sought it overhead.

The clouds were still there, the crazy sky doing its tricks beyond them. The brightness was in the clouds, however. They had paled and were now glowing, as if they masked a sun. Even as I watched, there was a perceptible brightening.

''What is he up to now?'' Chantris asked.

''Nothing that I can tell,'' Fiona said. ''I do not believe it is his doing.''

''Whose then?''

There was no answer that I could overhear.

I watched the clouds grow brighter The largest and brightest of them seemed to swirl then, as if stirred. Forms tossed within it, settled. An outline began to take shape.

Below me, on the field, the sounds of battle lessened. The storm itself was muted as the vision grew. Something was definitely forming in the bright place above our heads—the lines of an enormous face.

''I do not know, I tell you,'' I heard Fiona say in response to something mumbled.

Before it finished taking form, I realized that it was my father's face in the sky. Neat trick, that. And I had no idea what it represented either.

The face moved, as if he were regarding us all. There were lines of strain there, and something of concern to his expression. The brightness grew a little further. His lips moved.

When his voice came down to me, it was somehow at an ordinary conversational level rather than the vast booming I had expected:

''I send you this message,'' he said, ''before undertaking the repair of the Pattern. By the time you receive it, I will already have succeeded or failed. It will precede the wave of Chaos which must accompany my endeavor. I have reason to believe the effort will prove fatal to me.''

His eyes seemed to sweep across the field.

''Rejoice or mourn, as you would,'' he went on, ''for this is either the beginning or the end. I will send the Jewel of Judgment to Corwin as soon as I have finished with it. I have charged him to bear it to the place of conflict. All of your efforts there will be as nothing if the wave of Chaos cannot be averted. But with the Jewel, in that place, Corwin should be able to preserve you until it passes.''

I heard Brand's laugh. He sounded quite mad now.

''With my passing,'' the voice continued, ''the problem of the succession will be upon you. I had

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wishes in this regard, but I see now that these were futile. Therefore, I have no choice but to leave this on the horn of the unicorn.

"My children, I cannot say that I am entirely pleased with you, but I suppose this works both ways. Let it be. I leave you with my blessing, which is more than a formality. I go now to walk the Pattern. Goodbye."

Then his face began to fade and the brightness drained out of the cloudbank. A little while, and it was gone. A stillness lay upon the field.

". . . and, as you can see," I heard Brand saying, "Corwin does not have the Jewel. Throw down your weapons and get the hell out of here. Or keep them and get out. I do not care. Leave me alone. I have things to do."

"Brand," Fiona said, "can you do what he wanted of Corwin? Can you use it to make that thing miss us?"

"I could if I would," he said. "Yes, I could turn it aside."

"You will be a hero if you do," she said gently. "You will earn our gratitude. All past wrongs will be forgiven. Forgiven and forgotten. We—"

He began to laugh wildly.

"*You* forgive *me*?" he said. "You, who left me in that tower, who put the knife into my side? Thank you, sister. It is very kind of you to offer to forgive me, but excuse me if I decline."

"All right," Random said, "what *do* you want? A

"*You* forgive *me*?" he said. "You, who left me in that tower, who put the knife into my side?

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Thank you, sister. It is very kind of you to offer to forgive me, but excuse me if I decline."

"All right," Random said, "what *do* you want? An apology? Riches and treasure? An important appointment? All of these? They are yours. But this is a stupid game you are playing. Let us end it and go home, pretend it was all a bad dream."

"Yes, let us end it," Brand replied. "You do that by throwing down your weapons first. Then Fiona releases me from her spell, you all do an about face and march north. You do it or I kill Deirdre."

"Then I think you had better go ahead and kill her and be ready to fight it out with me," Random said, "because she will be dead in a little while anyway, if we let you have your way. All of us will."

I heard Brand's chuckle.

"Do you honestly think I am going to let you die? I need you—as many of you as I can save. Hopefully Deirdre, too. You are the only ones who can appreciate my triumph. I will preserve you through the holocaust that is about to begin."

"I do not believe you," Random said.

"Then take a moment and think about it. You know me well enough to know that I will want to rub your noses in it. I want you as witnesses to what I do. In this sense, I require your presence in my new world. Now, get out of here."

"You will have everything you want plus our gratitude," Fiona began, "if you will just—"

"Go!"

I knew that I could delay no longer. I had to make my move. I also knew that I could not reach him in time. I had no choice but to try using the Jewel as a weapon against him.

I reached out and felt its p esence. I closed my eyes and summoned my powers.

Hot. Hot, I thought. It is burning you, Brand. It is causing every molecule in your body to vibrate faster and faster. You are about to become a human torch—

I heard him scream.

"Corwin!" he bellowed. "Stop it! Wherever you are! I'll kill her! Look!"

Still willing the Jewel to burn him, I rose to my feet. I glared at him across the distance that separated us. His clothing was beginning to smoulder.

"Stop it!" he cried, and he raised the knife and slashed Deirdre's face.

I screamed and my eyes swam. I lost control of the Jewel. But Deirdre, her left cheek bloody, sank her teeth into his hand as he moved to cut her again. Then her arm was free, and she jabbed her elbow into his ribs and tried to pull away.

As soon as she moved, as soon as her head dropped, there was a silver flash. Brand gasped and let go the dagger. An arrow had pierced his throat. Another followed an instant later and stood out from his breast, a little to the right of the Jewel.

He stepped backward and made a gurgling noise. Only there was no place to which he might step from the edge of the abyss.

His eye went wide as he began to topple. Then his right hand shot

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forward and caught hold of Deirdre's hair. I was running by then, shouting, but I knew that I could not reach them in time.

Deirdre howled, a look of terror on her bloodstreaked face, and she reached out to me . . . .

Then Brand, Deirdre and the Jewel were over the edge and falling, vanished from sight, gone . . . .

I believe that I tried to throw myself after them, but Random caught hold of me. Finally, he had to hit me, and it all went away.

* * *

When I came around, I lay upon the stony earth farther back from the edge of that place where I had fallen. Someone had folded my cloak into a pillow for me. My first vision was of the turning sky, reminding me somehow of my dream of the wheel the day I had met Dara. I could feel the others about me, hear their voices, but I did not at first turn my head. I just lay there and regarded the mandala in the heavens and thought upon my loss. Deirdre . . . she had meant more to me than all the rest of the family put together. I cannot help it. That is how it was. How many times had I wished she were not my sister. Yet I had reconciled myself to the realities of our situation. My feelings would never change, but . . . now she was gone, and this thought meant more to me than the impending destruction of the world.

Yet, I had to see what was happening now. With the Jewel gone, everything was over. Yet . . . I reached out, trying to feel its presence, wherever it might be, but there was nothing. I began to rise then, to see how far the wave had advanced, but a sudden arm pushed me back.

"Rest, Corwin." It was Random's voice. "You're beat. You look as if you have just crawled through hell. There is nothing you can do now. Take it easy."

"What difference does the state of my health make?" I replied. "In a little while, it will not matter."

I made to rise again, and this time the arm moved to support me.

"All right, then," he said. "Not that much worth seeing, though."

I suppose that he was right. The fighting appeared to be over except for a few isolated pockets of resistance by the enemy, and these were rapidly being enveloped, their combatants slain or captured, everyone moving in this direction, withdrawing before the advancing wave which had reached the far end of the field. Soon our height would be crowded with all of the survivors from both sides. I looked behind us. No new forces were approaching from the dark citadel. Could we retreat to that place when the wave finally reached us here? Then what? The abyss seemed the ultimate answer. "Soon," I muttered, thinking of Deirdre. "Soon . . . ." Why not?

I watched the stormfront, flashing, masking, transforming. Yes, soon. With the Jewel gone along with Brand—

"Brand . . ." I said. "Who was it finally got him?"

"I claim that distinction," said a familiar voice which I could not place.

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I turned my head and stared. The man in green was seated on a rock. His bow and quiver lay beside him on the ground. He flashed an evil smile in my direction.

It was Caine.

"I'll be damned," I said, rubbing my jaw. "A funny thing happened to me on the way to your funeral."

"Yes. I heard about it." He laughed. "You ever kill yourself, Corwin?"

"Not recently. How'd you manage it?"

"Walked to the proper shadow," he said, "waylaid the shadow of myself there. He provided the corpse." He shuddered. "An eerie feeling, that. Not one I'd care to repeat."

"But why?" I said. "Why fake your death and try to frame me for it?"

"I wanted to get to the root of the trouble in Amber," he said, "and destroy it. I thought it best to go underground for that. What better way than by convincing everyone that I was dead? I finally succeeded, too, as you saw." He paused. "I'm sorry about Deirdre, though. But I had no choice. It was our last chance. I did not really think he would take her with him."

I looked away.

"I had no choice," he repeated. "I hope you can see that."

I nodded.

"But why did you try to make it look as if I had killed you?" I asked.

Just then Fiona approached with Bleys. I greeted them both and turned back to Caine for my answer. There were things I wanted to ask Bleys, too, but they would wait.

"Well?" I said.

"I wanted you out of the way," he said. "I still thought you might be behind the whole thing. You or Brand. I had it narrowed down that far. I thought it might even be the two of you in it together—especially with him struggling to bring you back."

"You have that wrong," said Bleys. "Brand was trying to keep him away. He had learned that his memory was returning and—"

"I gather," Caine relied, "but at the time it looked that way. So I wanted Corwin back in a dungeon while I searched for Brand. I lay low then and listened in on the Trumps to everything everyone said, hoping for a clue as to Brand's whereabouts."

"That's what Dad meant," I said.

"What?"

"He implied there was an eavesdropper on the Trumps."

"I do not see how he could have known. I had learned to be completely passive about it. I had taught myself to deal them all out and touch all of them lightly at the same time, waiting for a stirring. When it came, I would shift my attention to the speakers. Taking you one at a time, I even found I could sometimes get into your minds when you were not using the Trumps yourselves—if you were sufficiently distracted and I allowed myself no reaction."

"Yet he knew," I said.

"It is entirely possible. Likely, even," said Fiona, and Bleys nodded.

Random drew nearer.

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"What did you mean when you asked about Corwin's side?" he inquired. "How could you even know about it unless—"

Caine merely nodded. I saw Benedict and Julian together in the distance, addressing their troops. At Caine's silent movement, I forgot them.—

"You?" I croaked. "You stabbed me?"

"Have a drink, Corwin," Random said, passing me his flask. It was a dilute wine. I gulped it. My thirst was immense, but I stopped after several good swigs.

"Tell me about it," I said.

"All right. I owe you that," he said. "When I learned from Julian's mind that you had brought Brand back to Amber, I decided that an earlier guess had been correct—that you and Brand were in it together. That meant you both had to be destroyed. I used the Pattern to project myself into your chambers that night. There I tried to kill you, but you moved too fast and you somehow managed to Trump out before I got a second chance."

"Well, damn your eyes," I said. "If you could touch our minds, couldn't you have seen that I was not the man you were looking for?"

He shook his head.

"I could only pick up surface thoughts and reactions to your immediate environment. Not always that, even. And I had heard your curse, Corwin. And it was coming true. I could see it all around us. I felt that we would all be a lot safer with you and Brand both out of the way. I knew what he could do, from his actions back before your return. I could not get at him just then, though, because of Gérard. Then he began to grow stronger. I made one effort later, but it failed."

"When was that?" Random asked.

"That was the one Corwin got blamed for. I masked myself. In case he managed to get away as Corwin had, I did not want him knowing I was still around. I used the Pattern to project myself into his chambers and tried to finish him off. We were both hurt—there was a lot of blood around—but he managed to Trump away, too. Then I got in touch with Julian a while back and joined him for this battle, because Brand just had to show up here. I had some silver-tipped arrows made because I was more than half-convinced that he was no longer like the rest of us. I wanted to kill him fast and do it from a distance. I practiced my archery and came looking for him. I finally found him. Now everyone tells me I was wrong about you, so I guess your arrow will go unused."

"Thanks a lot."

"I might even owe you an apology."

"That would be nice."

"On the other hand, I thought that I was right. I was doing it to save the rest—"

I never did get Caine's apology, because just then a trumpet blast seemed to shake the entire world—directionless, loud, prolonged. We cast about, seeking its source.

Caine stood and pointed.

"There!" he said.

My eyes followed his gesture. The curtain of the stormfront was broken off to the northwest, at the point where the black road emerged

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from it. There a ghostly rider on a black horse had appeared and was winding his horn. It was a while before more of its notes reached us. Moments later, two more trumpeters—also pale, and mounted on black steeds—joined him. They raised their horns and added to the sound.

"What can it be?" Random asked.

"I think I know," Bleys said, and Fiona nodded.

"What, then?" I asked.

But they did not answer me. The horsemen were beginning to move again, passing along the black road, and more were emerging behind them.

XII.

I WATCHED. There was a great silence on the heights about me. All of the troops had halted and were regarding the procession. Even the prisoners from the Courts, hemmed by steel, turned their attention that way.

Led by the pale trumpeters, came a mass of horsemen mounted on white steeds, bearing banners, some of which I did not recognize, behind a man-thing who bore the unicorn standard of Amber. These wer e followed by more musicians, some of them playing upon instruments of a sort I had never seen before.

Behind the musicans marched horned man-shaped things in light armor, long columns of them, and every twentieth or so bore a great torch before him, reaching high above his head. A deep noise came to us then—slow, rhythmic, rolling beneath the notes of the trumpets and the sounds of the musicians—and I realized that the foot soldiers were singing. A great deal of time seemed to pass as this body advanced along that black way across the distant track below us, yet none of us stirred and none of us spoke. They passed, with the torches and the banners and the music and the singing, and they finally came to the edge of the abyss and continued on over the near-invisible extension of that dark highway, their torches flaring against the blackness now, lighting their way. The music grew stronger, despite the distance, with more and more voices added to that chorus, as the guard continued to emerge from that flashing stormcurtain. An occasional roll of thunder passed by, but this could not drown it; nor did the winds which assailed the torches extinguish any so far as I could see. The movement had a hypnotic effect. It seemed that I had been watching the procession for countless days, years perhaps, listening to the tune I now recognized.

Suddenly a dragon sailed through the stormfront, and another, and another. Green and golden and black as old iron, I watched them soar on the winds, turning their heads to trail pennons of fire. The lightning flashed behind them and they were awesome and magnificent and of incalculable size. Beneath them came a small herd of white cattle, tossing their heads and blowing, beating the ground with their hoofs. Riders passed beside and among these, cracking long black whips.

Then came a procession of truly bestial troops from a shadow with

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which Amber sometimes has commerce—heavy, scaled, taloned—playing upon instruments like bagpipes, whose skirling notes came to us with vibrance and pathos.

These marched on, and there were more torchbearers and more troops with their colors—from shadows both distant and near. We watched them pass and wind their way into the far sky, like a migration of fireflies, their destination that black citadel called the Courts of Chaos.

There seemed no end to it. I had lost all track of time. But the stormfront, strangely, was not advancing as all this went on. I had even lost something of my sense of person, to be caught up in the procession which passed us. This, I knew, was an event which could never be repeated. Bright flying things darted above the columns and dark ones floated, higher.

There were ghostly drummers, beings of pure light, and a flock of floating machines; I saw horsemen, clad all in black, mounted on a variety of beasts; a wyvern seemed to hang in the sky for a moment, like part of a fireworks display. And the sounds—of hoofbeats and footfalls, of singing and skirling, of drumming and trumpeting—mounted to a mighty wave that washed over us. And on, on, on out over the bridge of darkness, wound the procession, its lights lining the great span for a vast distance now.

Then, as my eyes drifted back along those lines, another shape emerged from the glistening curtain. It was a cart draped all in black and drawn by a team of black horses. At each corner rose a staff which glowed with blue fire, and atop it rested what could only be a casket, draped with our Unicorn flag. The driver was a hunchback clad in purple and orange garments, and I knew even at that distance that it was Dworkin.

It is thus, then, I thought. *I do not know why, but somehow it is fitting, fitting that it be the Old Country to which you travel now. There were many things that I might have said while you lived. Some of them I did say, but few of the right words were ever spoken. Now it is over, for you are dead. As dead as all of those who have gone before you into that place where the rest of us soon may follow. I am sorry. It was only after all these years, on your assuming another face and form, that I finally knew you, respected you, even came to like you—though you were a crochety old bastard in that form, too. Was the Ganelon self the real you all along, or was it only another form adopted for convenience's sake, Old Shapeshifter? I will never know, but I like to think that I finally saw you as you were, that I met someone I liked, someone I could trust, and that it was you. I wish that I might have known you even better, but I am grateful for this much . . . .*

"Dad. . . ?" Julian said softly.

"He wanted to be taken beyond the Courts of Chaos and into the final darkness when his time came at last," Bleys said. "So Dworkin once told me. Beyond Chaos and Amber, to a place where none reigned."

"And so it is," Fiona said. "But is there order somewhere beyond

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that wall they came through? Or does the storm go on forever? If he succeeded, it is but a passing matter and we are in no danger. But if he did not . . . ."

"It does not matter," I said, "whether or not he succeeded, because I did."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I believe that he failed," I said, "that he was destroyed before he could repair the Old Pattern. When I saw this storm coming—actually, I experienced a part of it—I realized that I could not possibly make it here in time with the Jewel, which he had sent to me after his efforts. Brand had been trying to get it from me all along the way—to create a new Pattern, he said. Later that gave me the idea. When I saw that all else was failing, I used the Jewel to create a new Pattern. It was the most difficult thing I ever did, but I succeeded. Things should hold together after this wave passes, whether we survive it or not. Brand stole the Jewel from me just as I completed it. When I recovered from his attack, I was able to use the new Pattern to project me here. So there is still a Pattern, no matter what else happens."

"But, Corwin," she said, "what if Dad succeeded?"

"I do not know."

"It is my understanding," Bleys said, "from things that Dworkin told me, that two distinct Patterns could not exist in the same universe. Those in Rebma and Tir-na Nog'th do not count, being but reflections of our own . . . ."

"What would happen?" I said.

"I think there would be a splitting off, the founding of a new existence—somewhere."

"Then what would its effect be upon our own?"

"Either total catastrophe or no effect whatsoever," Fiona said. "I can make a case for its going either way."

"Then we are right back where we started," I said. "Either things are going to fall apart shortly or they are going to hold."

"So it would seem," Bleys said.

"It does not matter, if we are not going to be around after that wave gets to us," I said. "And it will."

I turned my attention back to the funeral cortege. More horsemen had emerged behind the wagon, followed by marching drummers. The pennons and torches and a long line of foot soldiers. The singing still came to us, and far, far out over the abyss it seemed the procession might finally have reached that dark citadel.

. . . I hated you for so long, blamed you for so many things. Now it is over, and none of those feelings remain. Instead, you had even wanted me to be king, a job for which—I see now—I am not fitted. I see that I must have meant something to you after all. I will never tell the others. It is enough to know it myself. But I can never think of you in the same fashion again. Already your image blurs. I see Ganelon's face where yours should be. He was my companion. He risked his neck for me. He was you, but a different you—a you that I had not known. How many wives and enemies had you outlived? Were there many friends? I think not. But there were so many things

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about you of which we knew nothing. I never thought that I would see your passing. Ganelon—father—old friend and enemy, I bid you farewell. You join Deirdre, whom I have loved. You have preserved your mystery. Rest in peace, if that be your will. I give you this withered rose I have borne through hell, casting it into the abyss. I leave you the rose and the twisted colors in the sky. I will miss you . . . .

Finally the long line came to an end. The last marchers emerged from the curtain and moved away. The lightning still flared, the rain still poured and the thunder rumbled. No member of the procession that I could recall had seemed wet, however. I had been standing at the edge of the abyss, watching them pass. There was a hand on my arm. How long it had been there, I could not tell. Now that the passage was complete, I realized that the stormfront was advancing again.

The rotation of the sky seemed to be bringing more darkness upon us. There were voices off to my left. It seemed they had been talking for a long while, but I had not been hearing their words. I realized that I was shaking, that I ached all over, that I could barely stand.

"Come and lie down," Fiona said. "The family has shrunken enough for one day."

I let her lead me away from the edge.

"Would it really make any difference?" I asked. "How much longer do you think we have?"

"We do not have to stay here and wait for it," she said. "We will cross the dark bridge into the Courts. We have already broken their defense. The storm may not reach that far. It may be stopped here by the abyss. We ought to see Dad off, anyway."

I nodded.

"It would seem we have small choice but to be dutiful unto the end."

I eased myself down and sighed. If anything, I felt even weaker now.

"Your boots . . ." she said.

"Yes."

She pulled them off. My feet throbbed.

"Thanks."

"I'll get you some rations."

I closed my eyes. I dozed. Too many images played within my head to make for a coherent dream. How long this lasted, I do not know, but an old reflex drew me to wakefulness at the sound of an approaching horse. Then a shadow passed over my eyelids.

I looked up and beheld a muffled rider, silent, still. I was regarded.

I looked back. No threatening gesture had been made, but there was a feeling of antipathy in that cold gaze.

"There lies the hero," said a soft voice.

I said nothing.

"I could slay you easily now."

I recognized the voice then, though I had no idea as to the reason behind the sentiment.

"I came upon Borel before he died," she said. "He told me how ignobly you had bested him."

I could not help it, I could not control it. A dry chuckle rose in my throat. Of all the stupid things to get upset about, I might have told her that Borel had been far better

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equipped and far fresher than I, and that he had come to me looking for a fight. I might have told her that I do not recognize rules when my life is at stake, or that I do not consider war a game. I could have said a great number of things, but if she did not know them already or did not choose to understand them, they would not have made a bit of difference. Besides, her feelings were already plain.

So I simply said one of the great trite truths, "There is generally more than one side to a story."

"I will settle for the one I have," she told me.

I thought about shrugging, but my shoulders were too sore.

"You have cost me two of the most important persons in my life," she said then.

"Oh?" I said. "I'm sorry, for you."

"You are not what I was led to believe. I had seen you as a truly noble figure—strong, yet understanding and sometimes gentle. Honorable . . . ."

The storm, much closer now, was flaring at her back. I thought of something vulgar and said it. She let it pass as if she had not heard me.

"I am going now," she said, "back to my own people. You have won the day thus far—but that way lay Amber." She gestured toward the storm. I could only stare. Not at the raging element. At her. "I doubt there is anything of my new allegiance left for me to renounce," she continued.

"What about Benedict?" I asked softly.

"Don't . . ." she said, and she turned away. There was a silence. Then, "I do not believe that we will ever meet again," she said, and her horse carried her off to my left, in the direction of the black road.

A cynic might have decided that she had simply chosen to toss in her lot with what she now saw as the winning side, as the Courts of Chaos would likely survive. I simply did not know. I could only think of what I had seen when she had gestured. The cowling had slipped away and I had gotten a glimpse of what she had become. It had not been a human face, there within the shadows. But I turned my head and watched until she was gone. With Deirdre, Brand and Dad gone, and now a parting with Dara on these terms, the world was much emptier—whatever was left of it.

I lay back and sighed. Why not just remain here when the others departed, wait for the storm to wash over me, and sleep . . . dissolve? I thought of Hugi. Had I digested his flight from life as well as his flesh? I was so tired that it seemed the easiest course . . . .

"Here, Corwin."

I had been dozing again, though only for a moment. Fiona was beside me once more, with rations and a flask. Someone was with her.

"I did not wish to interrupt your audience," she said. "So I waited."

"You heard?" I asked.

"No, but I can guess," she said, "since she is gone. Here."

I swallowed some wine, turned my attention to the meat, the bread. Despite my state of mind, they tasted good to me.

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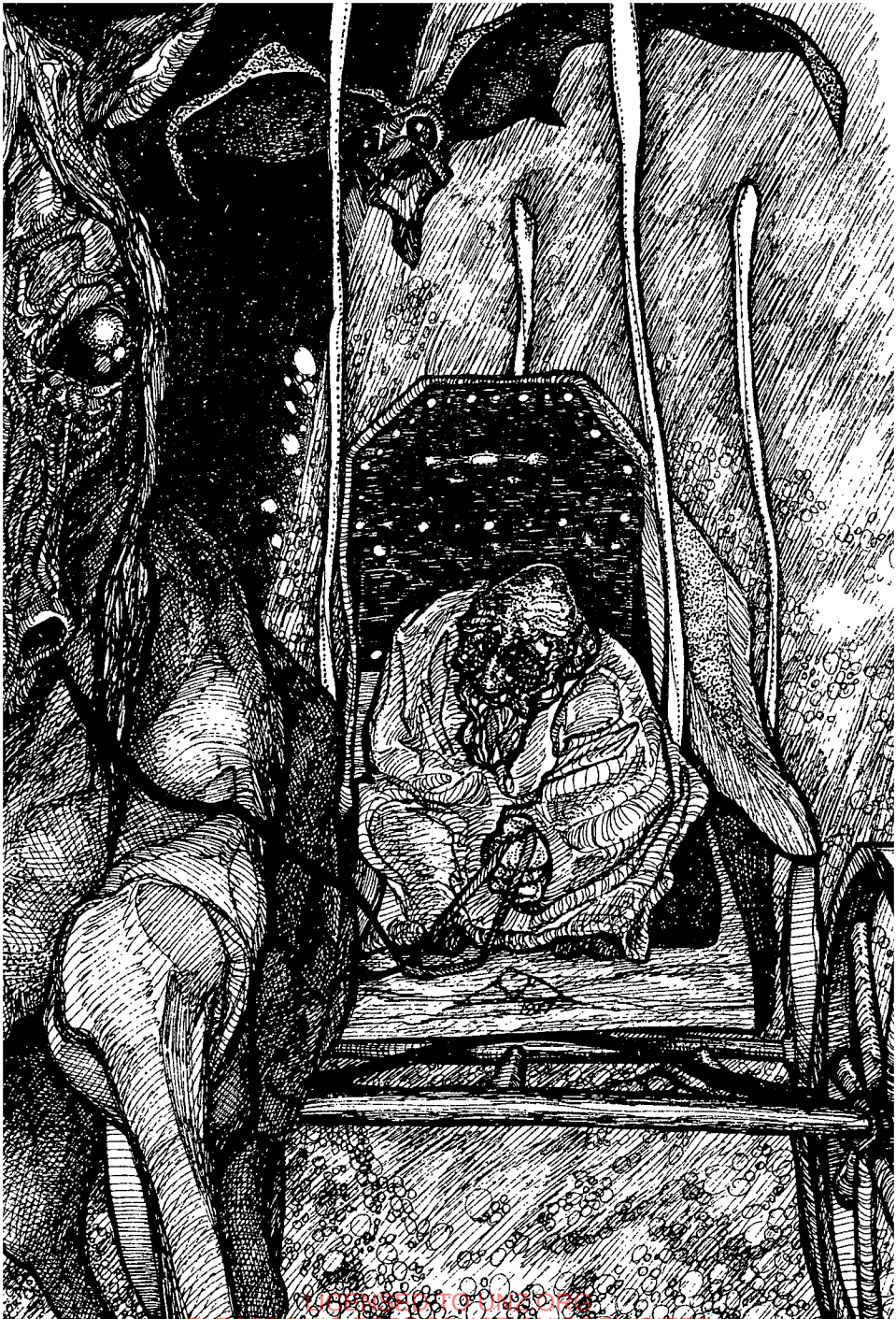

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"We will be moving soon," Fiona said, casting a glance at the raging stormfront. "Can you ride?"

"I think so," I said.

I took another drink of the wine.

"But too much has happened, Fi," I told her. "I have gone numb emotionally.

"I broke out of a sanitarium on a shodow world. I have tricked people and I've killed people. I have calculated and I have fought. I won back my memory and I have been trying to straighten out my life. I have found my family, and found that I love it. I have been reconciled with Dad. I have fought for the kingdom. I have tried everything I know to hold things together. Now it appears that it has all come to nothing, and I have not enough spirit left to mourn further. I have gone numb. Forgive me."

She kissed me.

"We are not yet beaten. You will be yourself again," she said.

I shook my head.

"It is like the last chapter of *Alice*," I said. "If I shout, 'You are only a pack of cards!' I feel we will all fly into the air, hand of painted pasteboards. I am not going with you. Leave me here. I am only the Joker, anyway."

"Right now I am stronger than you are," she said. "You are coming."

"It is not fair," I said softly.

"Finish eating," she said. "There is still some time."

As I did, she went on, "Your son Merlin is waiting to see you. I would like to call him up here now."

"Prisoner?"

"Not exactly. He was not a combatant. He just arrived a little while ago, asking to see you."

I nodded and she went away. I abandoned my rations and took another swig of wine. I had just become nervous. What do you say to a grown son you only recently learned existed? I wondered about his feelings toward me. I wondered whether he knew of Dara's decision. How should I act with him.?

I watched him approach from a place where my relatives were clustered, far off to my left. I had wondered why they had left me by myself this way. The more visitors I received, the more apparent it became.

I wondered whether they were holding up the withdrawal because of me. The storm's moist winds were growing stronger. He was staring at me as he advanced, no special expression on that face so much like my own.

I wondered how Dara felt now that her prophecy of the destruction seemed to have been fulfilled. I wondered how her relationship with the boy actually stood. I wondered . . . many things.

He leaned forward to clasp my hand.

"Father . . ." he said.

"Merlin." I looked into his eyes. I rose to my feet, still holding his hand.

"Do not get up,"

"It is all right." I clasped him to me, then released him. "I am glad," I said. Then, "Drink with me." I offered him the wine, partly to cover my lack of words.

"Thank you."

He took it, drank some and passed it back.

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"Your health," I said and took a sip myself. "Sorry I cannot offer you a chair."

I lowered myself to the ground. He did the same.

"None of the others seemed to know exactly what you have been doing," he said, "except for Fiona, who only said that it had been very difficult."

"No matter," I said. "I am glad to have made it this far, if for no other reason than this. Tell me of yourself, son. What are you like? How has life treated you?"

He looked away.

"I have not lived long enough to have done too much," he said.

I was curious whether he possessed the shapeshifting ability, but restrained myself from asking at this point. No sense in looking for our differences when I had just met him.

"I have no idea what it was like," I said, "growing up in the Courts."

He smiled for the first time.

"And I have no idea what it would have been like anywhere else," he responded. "I was different enough to be left to myself a lot. I was taught the usual things a gentlemen should know: magic, weapons, poisons, riding, dancing. I was told that I would one day rule in Amber. This is not true anymore, is it?"

"It does not seem too likely in the foreseeable future," I said.

"Good," he replied. "This is the one thing I did not want to do."

"What do you want to do?"

"I want to walk the Pattern in Amber as mother did and gain power over Shadow, so that I might walk there and see strange sights and do different things. Do you think I might?"

I took another sip and I passed him the wine.

"It is quite possible," I said, "that Amber no longer exists. It all depends on whether your grandfather succeeded in something he attempted—and he is no longer around to tell us what happened. However, one way or the other, there is a Pattern. If we live through this demon storm, I promise you that I will find you a Pattern, instruct you and see you walking it."

"Thanks," he said. "Now will you tell me of your journey here?"

"Later," I told him. "What did they tell you of me?"

He looked away.

"I was taught to dislike many of the things about Amber," he finally said. Then, after a pause, "You, I was taught to respect, as my father. But I was reminded that you were of the party of the enemy." Another pause. "I remember that time on patrol, when you had come to this place and I found you, after your fight with Kwan. My feelings were mixed. You had just slain someone I had known, yet—I had to admire the stand you took. I saw my face in your own. It was strange. I wanted to know you better."

The sky had rotated completely and the darkness was now above us, the colors passing over the Courts. The steady advance of the flashing stormfront was emphasized by this. I leaned forward and reached for my boots, began pulling them on. Soon it would be time to begin our retreat.

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"We will have to continue our conversation on your home ground," I said. "It is about time to fly the storm."

He turned and considered the elements, then looked back out over the abyss.

"I can summon a filmy if you wish."

"One of those drifting bridges such as you rode on the day we met?"

"Yes," he answered. "They are most convenient. I—"

There had been a shout from the direction of my assembled relatives. Nothing threatening seemed to be about when I regarded them. So I got to my feet and took a few steps toward them, Merlin rising to follow me.

Then I saw her. A white form, pawing air it seemed, and rising out of the abyss. Her front hoofs finally struck its brink, and she came forward and then stood still, regarding us all: our unicorn.

XIII.

FOR A MOMENT my aches and my fatigue fell away. I felt a tiny twinge of something like hope as I considered the dainty white form which stood before us. A part of me wanted to rush forward, but something much stronger kept me motionless, waiting.

How long we stood thus, I could not tell. Below, on the slopes, the troops had been readying themselves for travel. The prisoners had been bound, horses loaded, equipment secured. But this vast army in the process of march-ordering its gear had suddenly halted. It was not natural that they should have become aware so quickly, but every head that I could see was turned in this direction, toward the unicorn on the brink, limned against that wild sky.

I was suddenly aware that the wind at my back had grown still, though the thunder continued to rumble and explode and the lightning flares threw dancing shadows before me.

I thought of the other time I had seen the unicorn—at the recovery of the Shadow-Caine's body, the day I had lost a fight with Gérard. I thought of the stories I had heard . . . could she really help us?

The unicorn took a step forward and halted.

She was such a lovely thing that somehow I was heartened just by looking upon her. It was a kind of aching feeling that she aroused, though; hers was a beauty of the sort to be taken in small doses. And I could somehow sense the unnatural intelligence within that snowy head. I wanted very badly to touch her, but knew that I could not.

She cast her gaze all about. Her eyes lighted upon me, and I would have looked away if I were able. This was not possible, however, and I returned that gaze in which I read an understanding beyond my own. It was as if she knew everything about me, and in this instant had comprehended all of my recent trials—seeing, understanding, possibly sympathizing. For a moment I felt that I saw something of pity and a strong love reflected there—and perhaps a touch of humor.

Then her head turned and the

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gaze was broken. I sighed involuntarily. At that moment, in the lightning's glare, I thought I caught a glimpse of something shining at the side of her neck.

She advanced another step, and now she was looking upon the crowd of my kinsmen toward which I had been moving. She lowered her head and made a small whickering noise. She tapped at the earth with her right front hoof.

I felt Merlin at my side. I thought upon things I would be losing if it all ended here.

She took several dancing steps forward. She tossed her head and lowered it. It seemed that she did not like the notion of approaching so large a group of people.

At her next step, I saw the glitter again, and more. A tiny spark of red shone through her fur farther down on her neck. She was wearing the Jewel of Judgment. How she had retrieved it, I had no idea. And it did not matter. If she would just deliver it, I felt that I could break the storm—or at least shield us from this section of it until it had passed.

But that one glance had been enough. She paid me no more heed. Slowly, carefully, as if ready to bolt at the slightest disturbance, she advanced upon the spot where Julian, Random, Bleys, Fiona, Llewella, Benedict and several nobles stood.

I should have realized then what was occurring, but I did not. I simply watched the sleek beast's movements as she picked her way forward, passing about the periphery of the group.

She halted once again and lowered her head. Then she shook her mane and dropped to her front knees. The Jewel of Judgment hung suspended from her twisted, golden horn. The tip of her horn was almost touching the person before whom she knelt.

Suddenly, in my mind's eye, I saw our father's face in the heavens, and his words came back to me: "With my passing, the problem of the succession will be upon you . . . I have no choice but to leave this on the horn of the unicorn."

A murmur moved through the group, as I realized this same thought must be occurring to the others. The unicorn did not stir at this disturbance, however, but remained a soft, white statue, not even seeming to breathe.

Slowly Random reached forward and removed the Jewel from her horn. His whisper carried to me.

"Thank you," he said.

Julian unsheathed his blade and placed it at Random's feet as he knelt. Then Bleys and Benedict and Caine, Fiona and Llewella. I went and joined them. So did my son.

Random stood silent for a long while. Then, "I accept your allegiance," he said. "Now get up, all of you."

As we did, the unicorn turned and bolted. She raced down the slope and was out of sight in a matter of moments.

"I had never expected anything like this to happen," Random said, still holding the Jewel at eye level. "Corwin, can you take this thing and stop that storm?"

"It is yours now," I said, "and I do not know how extensive the disturbance is. It occurs to me that in

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my present condition I might not be able to hold up long enough to keep us all safe. I think it is going to have to be your first regal act."

"Then you are going to have to show me how to work it. I thought we needed a Pattern to perform the attunement."

"I think not. Brand indicated that a person who was already attuned could attune another. I have given it some thought since then, and I believe I know how to go about it. Let's get off to one side somewhere."

"Okay. Come on."

Already something new had come into his voice and posture. The sudden role had begun working its change immediately, it seemed. I wondered what sort of king and queen he and Vialle would beome. Too much. My mind felt disassociated. Too much had happened too recently. I could not contain all of the latest events in one big piece of thinking. I just wanted to crawl off somewhere and sleep around the clock. Instead, I followed him to a place where a small cooking fire still smouldered.

He poked at the fire and tossed a handful of sticks onto it. Then he seated himself close to it and nodded to me. I went over and sat down beside him.

"About this king business," he said. "What am I going to do, Corwin? It caught me totally unprepared."

"Do? Probably a very good job," I replied.

"Do you think there were many hard feelings?"

"If there were, they did not show," I said. "You were a good choice, Random. So much has happened recently . . . Dad sheltered us actually, maybe more than was good for us. The throne is obviously no plum. You have a lot of hard work ahead of you. I think the others have come to realize this."

"And yourself?"

"I wanted it only because Eric did. I did not realize it at the time, but it is true. It was the winning counter in a game we had been playing across the years. The end of a vendetta, really. And I would have killed him for it. I am glad now that he found another way to die. We were more alike than we were different, he and I. I did not realize that until much later either. But after his death, I kept finding reasons for not taking the throne. Finally it dawned on me that it was not really what I wanted. No. You are welcome to it. Rule well, brother. I am sure that you will."

"If Amber still exists," he said after a time, "I will try. Come, let us be about this business with the Jewel. That storm is getting uncomfortably near."

I nodded and took the stone from his fingers. I held it by its chain with the fire behind it. The light came through; its insides seemed clear. "Lean closer and stare into the Jewel with me," I directed.

He did this, and while we both regarded the stone, I told him, "Think of the Pattern," and I commenced thinking of it myself, trying to summon to mind its loops and swirls, its palely glowing lines.

I seemed to detect a slight flaw near to the stone's center. I considered it as I thought upon the twistings, the turns, the Veils . . . I im-

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agined the current which swept through me every time I essayed that complex way.

The imperfection in the stone grew more distinct.

I lay my will upon it, summoning it into fullness, clarity. A familiar feeling came over me as this occurred. It was that which had taken me on the day I had attuned myself to the Jewel. I only hoped that I was strong enough now to go through the experience once again.

I reached out and clasped Random by the shoulder.

"What do you see?" I asked him.

"Something like the Pattern," he said, "only it seems to be three-dimensional. It lies at the bottom of a red sea . . . ."

"Come with me then," I said. "We must go to it."

Again that feeling of movement, drifting at first, then falling with increasing velocity toward the never-fully seen sinuosities of the Pattern within the Jewel. I willed us ahead, feeling my brother's presence beside me, and the ruby glow which surrounded us darkened, becoming the blackness of a clean night sky. This special Pattern grew with each thudding heartbeat. Somehow the process seemed easier than it had before—perhaps because I was already attuned.

Feeling Random beside me, I drew him along as that familiar shape grew and its starting point became apparent. As we were moved in that direction, I once again tried to encompass the totality of this Pattern and was lost, once more in what seemed its extra-dimensional convolutions. Great curves and spirals and knotted-seeming traceries wound before us. The sense of awe I had felt earlier swept over me, and from somewhere nearby I was aware of this in Random, also.

We progressed to the section of the beginning and were swept into it. There was a shimmering brightness all about us, flashed through with sparks, as we were woven into the matrix of light. This time my mind was entirely abosrbed by the process and Paris seemed far away . . . .

A subsconscious memory reminded me of the more difficult sections, and here I employed my desire—my will, if you like—to hurry us along the dazzling route, recklessly drawing strength from Random to accelerate the process.

It was as if we negotiated the luminous interior of an enormous and elaborately convoluted seashell. Only our passage was soundless, and we ourselves disembodied points of sentience.

Our velocity seemed to increase constantly, as did a mental aching I did not recall from the previous traversal of the design. Perhaps it was related to my fatigue, or to my efforts to hurry things so. We crashed through the barriers; we were surrounded by steady, flowing walls of brightness. I felt myself growing faint, dizzy, now. But I could not afford the luxury of unconsciousness, nor could I permit us to move more slowly with the storm as near as I remembered it. Again, regretfully, I drew strength from Random—this time just to keep us in the game. We sped ahead.

This time I did not experience the

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tingling, fiery sensation of somehow being shaped. It must have been an effect of my attunement. My previous passage through it might have rendered me some small immunity in this regard.

After a timeless interval, it seemed that I felt Random falter. Perhaps I represented too great a drain upon his energies. I began to wonder whether I would leave him with sufficient strength to manipulate the storm if I leaned upon him any further. I resolved not to draw upon his resources any more than I already had. We were well along the way. He should be able to continue without me, if it came to that. I would simply have to hang on as best I could now. Better for me to be lost here than both of us.

We swept on, my senses rebelling, the dizziness recurring. I set my will to our progress and forced everything else from my mind. It seemed we were nearing the terminus when a darkening began which I knew was not a part of the experience. I fought down panic.

It was no good. I felt myself slipping away. So close! I was certain we were almost finished. It would be so easy to—

Everything swam away from me. My last sensation was a knowledge of Random's concern.

* * *

It was flickering orange and red between my feet. Was I trapped in some astral hell? I continued to stare as my mind slowly cleared. The light was surrounded by darkness and . . . .

There were voices, familiar . . . .

Things cleared. I was lying on my back, feet toward a campfire.

"It is all right, Corwin. It is all right."

It was Fiona who had spoken. I turned my head. She was seated on the ground above me.

"Random. . . ?" I said.

"He is all right, also—Father."

Merlin was seated off to the right.

"What happened?"

"Random bore you back," Fiona said.

"Did the attunement work?"

"He thinks so."

I struggled to sit up. She tired to push me back, but I sat up anyway.

"Where is he?"

She gestured with her eyes.

I looked and I saw Random. He was standing with his back to us about thirty meters away, on a shelf of rock, facing the storm. It was very close now, and a wind whipped his garments. Lightning trails crissed and crossed before him. The thunder boomed almost constantly.

"How long—has he been there?" I asked.

"Only a few minutes," Fiona replied.

"That is how long it has been—since our return?"

"No," she said. "You have been out for a fairly long while. Random talked with the others first, then ordered a troop withdrawal. Benedict has taken them all to the black road. They are crossing over."

I turned my head.

There was movement along the black road, a dark column heading out toward the citadel. Gossamer strands drifted between us; there

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were a few sparks at the far end, about the nighted hulk. Overhead, the sky had completely reversed itself, with us beneath the darkened half. Again I felt that strange feeling of having been here long, long ago, to see that this, rather than Amber, was the true center of creation. I grasped after the ghost of a memory. It vanished.

I searched the lightning-shot gloom about me.

"All of them—done?" I said to her. "You, me, Merlin, Random—we're the only ones left here?"

"Yes," Fiona said. "Do you wish to follow them now?"

I shook my head.

"I am staying here with Random."

"I knew you would say that."

I got to my feet as she did. So did Merlin. She clapped her hands and a white horse came ambling up to her.

"You have no further need for my ministrations," she said. "So I will go and join the others in the Courts of Chaos. There are horses for you tethered by those rocks." She gestured. "Are you coming, Merlin?"

"I will stay with my father, and the king."

"So be it. I hope to see you there soon."

"Thanks, Fi," I said.

I helped her to mount and watched her ride off.

I went over and sat down by the fire again. I watched Random, who stood unmoving, facing the storm.

"There are plenty of rations and wine," Merlin said. "May I fetch you some?"

"Good idea."

The storm was so close that I could have walked down to it in a couple of minutes. I could not tell yet whether Random's efforts were having any effect. I sighed heavily and let my mind drift.

Over. One way or another, all of my efforts since Greenwood were over. No need for revenge any longer. No. We had an intact Pattern, maybe even two. The cause of all our troubles, Brand, was dead. Any residuum of my curse was bound to be wiped out by the massive convulsions sweeping through Shadow. And I had done my best to make up for it. I had found a friend in my father and come to terms with him as himself before his death. We had a new king, with the apparent blessing of the unicorn, and we had pledged him our loyalty. It seemed sincere to me. I was reconciled with my entire family. I felt that I had done my duty. Nothing drove me now. I had run out of causes and was as close as I might ever be to peace. With all this behind me, I felt that if I had to die now, it was all right. I would not protest quite so loudly as I would have at any other time.

"You are far from here, Father."

I nodded, then smiled. I accepted some food and began eating. As I did, I watched the storm. Still too early to be certain, but it seemed that it was no longer advancing.

I was too tired to sleep. Or something like that. My aches had all subsided and a wondrous numbness had come over me. I felt as if I were embedded in warm cotton. Events and reminiscences kept the mental clockwork turning within

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me. It was, in many ways, a delicious feeling.

I finished eating and built up the fire. I sipped the wine and watched the storm, like a frosted window set before a fireworks display. Life felt good. If Random succeeded in pulling this one off, I would be riding into the Courts of Chaos tomorrow. What might await me there, I could not tell. Perhaps it might be a gigantic trap. An ambush. A trick. I dismissed the thought. Somehow, right now, it did not matter.

"You had begun telling me of yourself, Father."

"Had I? I do not recall what I said."

"I would like to get to know you better. Tell me more."

I made a popping noise with my lips and shrugged.

"Then this." He gestured. "This whole conflict. How did it get started? What was your part in it? Fiona told me that you had dwelled in Shadow for many years without your memory. How did you get it back and locate the others, and return to Amber?"

I chuckled. I regarded Random and the storm once more. I took a drink of wine and drew up my cloak against the wind.

"Why not?" I said then. "If you've a stomach for long stories, that is . . . I suppose that the best place to begin is at Greenwood Private Hospital, on the shadow Earth of my exile. Yes . . . ."

XIV.

THE SKY TURNED, and turned again as I spoke. Standing against the storm, Random prevailed. It broke before us, parting as if cloven by a giant's axeblade. It rolled back at either hand, finally sweeping off to the north and the south, fading, diminishing, gone. The landscape it had masked endured, and with it went the black road. Merlin tells me that this is no problem, though, for he will summon a strand of gossamer when the time comes for us to cross over.

Random is gone now. The strain upon him was immense. In repose, he no longer looked as once he did—the brash younger brother we delighted in tormenting—for there were lines upon his face which I had never noticed before, signs of some depth to which I had paid no heed. Perhaps my vision has been colored by recent events, but he seemed somehow nobler and stronger. Does a new role work some alchemy? Appointed by the unicorn, annointed by the storm, it seems that he had indeed assumed a kingly mien, even in slumber.

I have slept—even as Merlin now dozes—and it pleases me to be, for this brief while before his awakening, the only spot of sentience on this crag at the rim of Chaos, looking back upon a surviving world, a world that has been scoured, a world which endures . . . .

We may have missed Dad's funeral, his drifting into some nameless place beyond the Courts. Sad, but I lacked the strength to move. And yet, I have seen the pageant of his passing, and I bear much of his life within me. I have said my good-byes. He would understand. And good-bye, Eric. After all this time I say it, in this way. Had you lived so long, it would have been

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over between us. We might even one day have become friends, all our cases for strife passed. Of them all, you and I were more alike than any other pair within the family. Save, in some ways, Deirdre and myself . . . but tears on this count were shed long ago. Good-bye again, though, dearest sister, you will always live somewhere in my heart.

And you, Brand . . . with bitterness do I regard your memory, mad brother. You almost destroyed us. You nearly toppled Amber from her lofty perch on the breast of Kolvir. You would have shattered all of Shadow. You almost broke the Pattern and redesigned the universe in your own image. You were mad and evil, and you came so close to realizing your desires that I tremble even now. I am glad that you are gone, that the arrow and the abyss have claimed you, that you sully no more the places of men with your presence nor walk in the sweet airs of Amber. I wish that you had never been born and failing that, that you had died sooner. Enough! It diminishes me to reflect so. Be dead and trouble my thinking no more.

I deal you out like a hand of cards, my brothers and sisters. It is painful as well as self-indulgent to generalize like this, but you, I—we—seem to have changed, and before I move into the traffic again, I require a final look.

Caine, I never liked you and I still do not trust you. You have insulted me, betrayed me and even stabbed me. Forget that. I do not like your methods, though I cannot fault your loyalty this time around. Peace, then. Let the new reign begin with a clean slate between us.

Llewella, you possess reserves of character the recent situation did not call upon you to exercise. For this, I am grateful. It is sometimes pleasant to emerge from a conflict untested.

Bleys, you are still a figure clad in light to me—valiant, exuberant and rash. For the first, my respect; for the second, my smile. And the last seems to have at least been tempered in recent times. Good. Stay away from conspiracies in the future. They do not suit you well.

Fiona, you have changed the most. I must substitute a new feeling for an old one, princess, as we have become for the first time friends. Take my fondness, sorceress. I owe you.

Gérard, slow, faithful brother, perhaps we have not all changed. You stood rock-like and held to what you believed. May you be less easily gulled. May I never wrestle you again. Go down to your sea in your ships and breathe the clean salt air.

Julian, Julian, Julian . . . is it that I never really knew you? No. Arden's green magic must have softened that old vanity during my long absence, leaving a juster pride and something I would fain call fairness—a thing apart from mercy, to be sure, but an addition to your armory of traits I'll not disparage.

And Benedict, the gods know you grow wiser as time burns its way to entropy, yet you still neglect single examples of the species in your knowledge of people. Perhaps I'll see you smile now this battle's done. Rest, warrior.

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Flora . . . charity, they say, begins at home. You seem no worse now than when I knew you long ago. It is but a sentimental dream to regard you and the others as I do, totting up my balance sheets, looking for credits. We are not enemies, any of us, now, and that should be sufficient.

And the man clad in black and silver with a silver rose upon him? He would like to think that he has learned something of trust, that he has washed his eyes in some clear spring, that he has polished an ideal or two. Never mind. He may still be only a smart-mouthed meddler, skilled mainly in the minor art of survival, blind as ever the dungeons knew him to the finer shades of irony. Never mind, let it go, let it be. I may never be pleased with him.

Carmen, voulez-vous venir avec moi? No? Then good-bye to you too, Princess of Chaos. It might have been fun.

The sky is turning once more, and who can say what deeds its stained-glass light might shine upon? The solitaire has been dealt and played. Where there had been nine of us, now there are seven and one king. Yet Merlin and Martin are with us, new players in the ongoing game.

My strength returns as I stare into the ashes and consider the path I have taken. The way ahead intrigues me, from hell to hallelujah. I have back my eyes, my memories, my family. And Corwin will always be Corwin, even on judgment day.

Merlin is stirring now, and this is good. It is time to be about. There are things to do.

Random's last act after defeating the storm was to join with me, drawing power from the Jewel, to reach Gérard through his Trump. They are cold once more, the cards, and the shadows are themselves again. Amber stands. Years have passed since we departed it, and more may elapse before I return. The others may already have trumped home, as Random has done, to take up his duties. But I must visit the Courts of Chaos now, because I said that I would, because I may even be needed there.

We ready our gear now, Merlin and I, and soon he will summon a wispy roadway.

When all is done in that place, and when Merlin has walked his Pattern and gone to claim his worlds, there is a journey that I must make. I must ride to the place where I planted the limb of old Ygg, visit the tree it has grown to. I must see what has become of the Pattern I drew to the sound of pigeons on the Champs-Elysées. If it leads me to another universe, as I now believe it will, I must go there, to see how I have wrought.

The roadway drifts before us, rising to the Courts in the distance. The time has come. We mount and move forward.

We are riding now across the blackness on a road that looks like cheesecloth. Enemy citadel, conquered nation, trap, ancestral home . . . we shall see. There is a faint flickering from battlement and balcony. We may even be in time for a funeral. I straighten my back and I loosen my blade. We will be there before much longer.

Good-bye and hello, as always. ★

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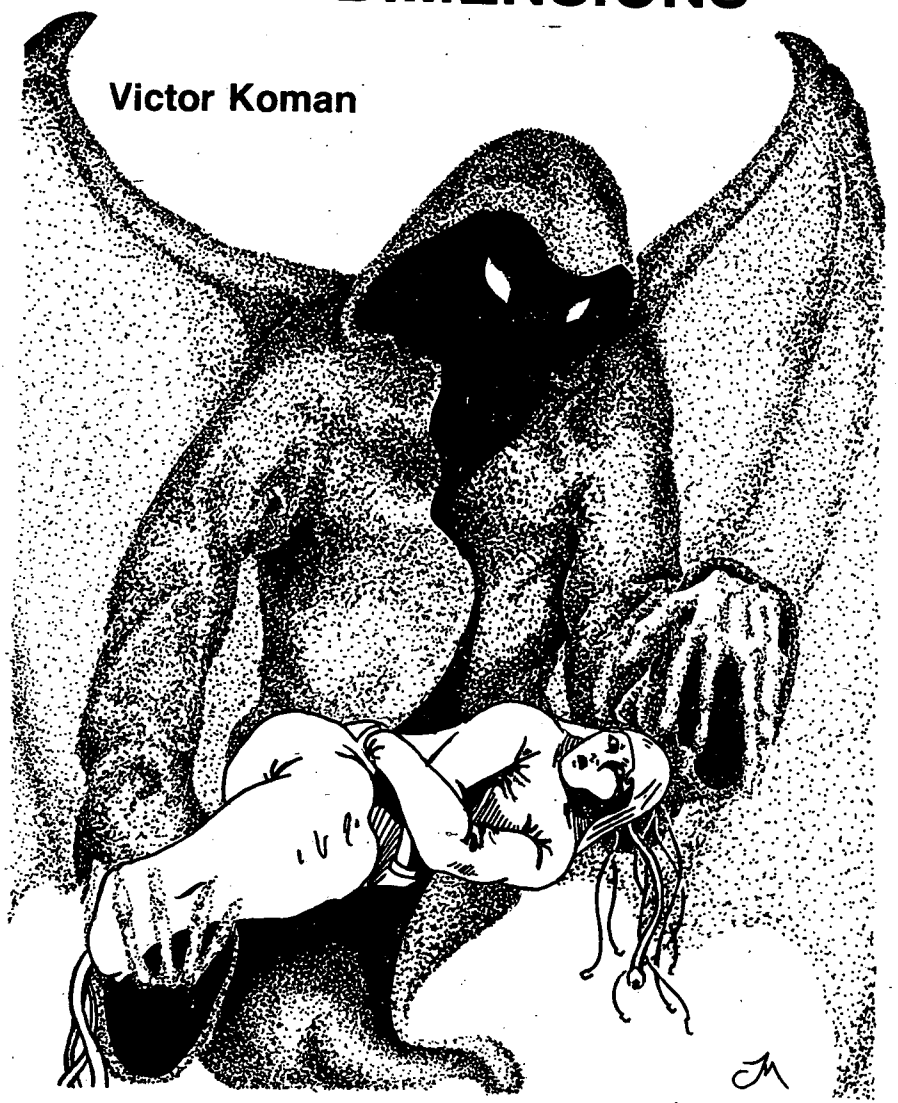
DEATH'S DIMENSIONS

Victor Koman



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They knew the man was crazy—but then, so was the job they wanted him for!

FOOTSTEPS. Virgil Grissom Kinney spent so much time in the cream-white room that he could detect sounds through the baffling and the soundproofing.

Two of them. Marsface's familiar step, favoring his right leg where I bit him once so long ago, shuffles and stomps through the floor padding at the limits of hearing.

The other set of footsteps was unfamiliar. Light, even, quick.

Probably Death's Angel coming to get me after having tea and biscuits with Marsface and the Master Snoop. Probably coming because Master Snoop knows I've figured a way out. I can hear both of them up there sometimes, and the Master Snoop, their machinery watching, listening, monitoring, recording every movement of every cell in my—wha? Oh, yeah—the door. They're here.

The door appeared in a section of padding and opened inward. Mental Health Technician William Bearclaw, clipboard and scrimsheet in hand, pointed to Virgil. The woman gazed at the wrapped body and shook her head.

Marsface. I knew it, didn't I? Same Marsface—red, round head with its craters and gorges and mole-mountains. But Death Angel doesn't look like he's supposed to. Why is he wearing a print dress? Master Snoop's trying to screw me up. It won't work. I know how to get out and I don't need them. They're talking in their language again. Got to concentrate and break their code. It'll give me a clue.

"Yes, Ms. Double, he's—"

"Doublé. Accent grave over the *e*."

"Yes, Miz. You can see the lengths we had to go to restrain him. A man can kill himself against a padded wall if he keeps pounding it every moment. He dies of exhaustion and dehydration."

"His class?"

"Psychotic, with a good dose of manic-depressive, although I've never seen him manic. Duodrugs have no effect on him. The Pharmaceutics are mystified but I think Virgil here has a multiple personality. We can drug one or two or three of them but he always has one that surfaces unaffected." He looked worried. "Don't tell anyone though. It's not a very sound theory. The drugs should act on the brain, not the mind."

The woman stepped closer to Virgil and looked into his eyes, almost the only part of his body not wrapped in restraining sheets. He lay near the center of the room, on his side, resembling a white inchworm. He did not move except to follow her with his green eyes. A curl of sweaty, greasy blond hair hung over one eyebrow. Reaching out, the woman brushed it away from his eyelid.

What's she trying? To claw inside my head? I want to die on my own, damn it. I've got my escape mapped out. No, musn't think about it. Master Snoop, fuck you. Black hair falling to her shoulders and wrapping

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like snakes around her near-white throat. Isn't she afraid it'll strangle her? Stupid—Death Angel doesn't have to fear its master. Snoop? But I've never heard her upstairs. Stupid again—she must've been barefoot and walking with pregnant pause.

"If the Feds were still around, he'd be certifiable. As it is, he's here because an insurance policy he filed a long time ago had an insanity-care clause."

"Insanity? Is that chestnut coming back? What happened to Reality Premises and Szaszian therapy? You're keeping him against his will, aren't you?" Indignation made her stand straighter.

"Yes, Ms. Doublé. But the circumstances are very unusual. The patient likes to commit suicide. He's tried it about seven times that we know of. But he's not like most suiciders that can be left alone or that the churches get. His attempts have always involved massive property damage and danger to others."

"Never touched a SeppukuKit?"

"His mind doesn't run in those directions. He'd make a great daredevil but he'd keep forgetting to pull the ripcord and would land in the grandstands. That kind of suicider. Are you sure you can use him? I'll give you his complete file first."

"I'll take him. And the file." She held out her hand. Taking the thin viewscrim, she slipped it into her notebook and then frowned. "But who put him in your care in the first place?"

"His insurance company. His last attempt ruined about a kilauro worth of property and killed a young girl. Her parents sued and the insurance company paid off. And then paid for his perpetual care.

"He's a threat, Miz. He won't kill himself by refusing to eat but he'll do anything that'll damage himself and as many material items as possible. The behavior mod doesn't work and none of us have ever gotten him to say anything."

"The Brennen Trust has a place for him."

"I hope so, Ms. Doublé."

Death Angel and Marsface walk out goodbye. My plan's almost ready anyway. I'll meet the Nightsheet on my own terms. If only I had a match or could scratch my butt. Hatch my gut. Stupid.

* * *

Virgil's eyes opened after they had closed and the room changed. His body trembled inside the sheets.

I did it! It worked and I didn't even have to think about it. Free! Almost. Why did I bring the sheets with me? Stupid—they were too close to you. I'll get out, though. Did Master Snoop follow me? Don't know. Too noisy. Am I in their control room? Did I escape right into their clutches? Shit.

"He's awake, Dee." The graying Pharmaceutic sat near a bank of indicators flashing red, green and turquoise. Dee Doublé needed no brain-wave machines to see him open his eyes. He lay on a wide table with raised edges, his body white and mummy-like against the soft black leather. The portions of the walls that had no machinery showed a soothing brown wood paneling.

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Lights! Sounds! Operators! I blew it. Right in with the Master Snoop. Death Angel too. It makes sense they wouldn't let Marsface in here; they run him too. Damn.

"He's looking around, Steve. Maybe we should have kept him in some sort of white room. Doesn't matter. I don't think he's as out of it as Duolab thought. Get the injection ready."

Dee Doublé looked closer at the prone body. "Virgil Grissom Kinney," she said. The eyes riveted hers. "Good. Virgil, I'm going to give you your choice. You were never given any choices at Duolab and now I'm going to give you one. Do you understand?"

Death Angel hovers over me as I lie in my coffin. Stupid coffin with no lid. Soft pink lips move and I can almost break her code. Words come through the roar. The roaring parts a bit and I break her code. She wants something. I'll go along with it. The roar's never been broken before. Break the roar and I can crack her code. Take it easy.

"Good. Virgil, they tell me you like to kill yourself."

She knows about them! But she must. She's one of them. Remember that. You've cracked her code, maybe you can crack theirs. The roar's less now.

"I'm going to offer you a choice. I have two injections here. One is a poison that will kill you in a matter of seconds. The other will help you."

Two bottles. One liter black with skull and crossbones. One white with a yellow smile face. She placed them on a table out of Virgil's view.

"Blink your eyes once for the poison or twice for the other."

"Fff—"

"What?" blurted Doublé. "Steve, he's trying to talk!"

"Loosen his neck a bit." She did so, using bandage scissors to snip away the fabric. Saliva dripped down his chin.

"Fff. . .fuh. . .false dichotomy."

The sound startled her; the scissors dropped to the floor noisily.

"I think that means he doesn't want either injection." The old man smiled wickedly and watched the woman.

"Well," she said, turning back to Virgil, "it wouldn't have mattered anyway because I would have switched labels to make sure you got what was in this one." She held up the bottle with the smile face. "The other one's empty." She hung the bottle over his head.

"Now, Virgil, I'm going to inject you, false dichotomy or not. The firm I represent has bought out the premium on your insurance so, in effect, we own you. We've bailed you out and you're going to pay us off. Or did you want to stay locked up forever?"

What's her game? I get it. I may have cracked her cipher *but not her* code. *I know what she's saying but not what she* means. *If I could get out of my room, maybe I can get out of this one too. Three, four, five times I can try.*

He nodded as far as his swathing allowed, then stopped and shook his head back and forth.

"Do you want to say anything else?" His head shook a no.

"Administer, Steve."

The old man stood up and pre-

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pared a needle. One patch of Virgil's body other than his face lay open and exposed—the injection port in his right wrist. Steve pushed the blunted needle into the plastic valve surgically sewn and laser-welded to skin and vein. The needle clicked into place. Clear serum from the bottle overhead trickled slowly through the plastic tube. Somewhere a camera's zoom lens rotated, closing in for facial reaction. The electronic measuring devices mused to themselves, recording.

It's not working. Whatever they're trying, it's failing. I don't feel any different. Should I tell them, gloat-gloat? No. Play along. If I can escape, I can get away. Find something to get Master Snoop and Nightsheet at once. Drop a tanker on them. Okay.

"What you're getting, Virgil, is a mixture of distilled water and ribonucleic acid. Ever heard of it?" Virgil shook his head. "Memory juice. Every living thing has it. You're getting the memories of a man who did something. We want to know why he did it. You won't be able to tell us but when he died, he had things in his head that take a long time to teach and we're just cutting corners because we're in a hurry." She paused.

Virgil nodded nervously, a trickle of sweat running down his brow.

They're filling me up with someone else's brain! Maybe I can get him to help me. But I don't hear him. The roar is coming back. I'm losing her cipher. Back. Focus. They're trying to make it hard for me. I'll get out. There. Less roar, and her cipher's broken again.

"Would you like to know what we know about you?" He nodded carefully. "Good. Shake your head if you don't remember anything I read."

She slipped the top of the scrim into her clipboard and signaled the first page. It appeared in dark gray letters against a light gray background.

"You are Virgil Grissom Kinney. You are thirty-four years old. Oh, you didn't know that? It's twenty-one seven. March fifth." His eyes widened. "You've been interned for twelve years, ever since you tried to kill yourself by flying into the TransAmerica Pyramid. Luckily for all but one person, a Monroe gust caught your flyer and flipped it into a power dive into Market Street. You killed a three-year-old girl." Virgil shook his head. "Well, you did. They—your insurance company, that is—settled with the parents and the streetowners for compensation on the stipulation that you receive perpetual care." She glanced through the next few pages, then shut off the scrim. "I emphasized *tried* to kill yourself because I think you don't really want to die. Do you?"

"Off the scale," said Steve, reaching to reset a meter, "whatever that means. That's a key question."

She nodded. "But if you don't want to die, why do you keep trying? Publicity hound? But three of your attempts were in out-of-the-way spots: your snowmobile at Ostrander Lake, your powersuit against El Capitan, another powersuit against Mount Rushmore. You were found each time before you were dead but," she shrugged, "I'm not interested in your luck."

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She turned to Steve and whispered, "Begin sublimins."

They're doing something.

"You were an economist, weren't you?"

Virgil nodded tentatively.

"Then you'll find some of the things you'll learn easy to understand. Just think of physics as the economics of efficient atomic action. Now—all atomic particles are composed of the following bounded energy quanta. . . ."

* * *

Three days. Three days and I still don't understand her code. I've got her cipher figured out. The physics of space travel. I don't remember thinking much about space flight before they caught me. There was the Earthrope's launch and its getting lost and all that when I was a kid. But what's this about teleportation? I thought I was the only one who could do that, and I didn't even know I did it when I did it and I haven't done it since. I've tried to leave this room like I left the last one but it's no good. You've got to try. Or maybe you should go along with them until you find how they teleport. Here she comes again. Death Angel in a clean white lab coat.

"Virgil. I hope you're feeling well today. I'm going to unwrap you. It's going to hurt and it will be physically dangerous to you. If you aren't careful, you may die. If you want to die, I can't stop you."

She removed the waste-cycling tube that connected to another tube taped to his thigh and set it aside. Large bandage scissors went to work, first on his head.

"How long has it been since they changed these? A week? Two?" A shock of wet, yellow hair was revealed on his head when she pulled the sheet away.

"Thanks."

She started. Regaining composure, she continued snipping away. "Three words in as many days. That's something."

Maybe she's not working for Master Snoop. Could she be a free agent? Maybe Master Snoop and Nightsheet aren't in cahoots any more. I need more information. Stupid.

An arm fell limply to the couch. Atrophied and deathly white, its fingers twitched weakly. The other arm was the same except for a burn scar running its length. His chest heaved when freed from the restraints.

"Don't," she warned. "You'll hyperventilate." Carefully she cut the cloth away from his waist and thighs. "Well, you're a real blond, all right."

She jumped back when he laughed and tried to drag his hands toward his crotch.

His arms wavered about helplessly, bouncing off the side of the black leather couch and coming to rest on his flat, muscleless stomach. She clipped the bindings around his legs, removed the rest of the waste tubes and then stared thoughtfully at the pitifully thin body before her.

"You go on solids tomorrow. And you begin training."

"And if I don't want to?" A sneer flashed palely across his lips for a second.

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"Thank God," she whispered. Then, louder: "Here's a scalpel. You can slash your wrists right now or I'll do it for you. Or you can kill me and try to escape. There's a limitless number of possibilities. But you don't go in for real suicide and I don't think you'd ever kill anyone intentionally."

"You cut my wrists."

His image swam before her. She shook her head. *Failure,* she thought, *after all this. Or maybe he's just bluffing.* She took the scalpel from his open fingers and held it over the pulsing blue veins on his scarred right wrist. *I can't go through with this. It's murder. Say stop, damn you!*

He watched the bright sliver of metal touch his skin. *She means it!*

"No!" His head fell back against the couch.

She dropped the scalpel on a tray and sat down. *Better ask it now.* "Why don't you want to die?"

"Nobody wants to die."

"But you keep trying to. Why?"

She's making the roar come back. Get her back. "What's your name?"

"Dee."

"Your whole name."

"None of your business. It's a dumb name."

He picked up the scalpel from the tray and brought it to his veins.

She hesitated for an instant. "No! Okay, you win this one. My name is Doublé. Diehla Doublé. And forget the obvious jokes. My parents had a sick sense of humor. And there's an accent grave over the *e*."

"Accent acute. Did you spring me just to give me a physics course?"

Remarkable! Or is it? Maybe he just didn't like being wrapped up for a decade or so. "You've adjusted well to your new surroundings." *Must be the RNA from Jord.* "You're here because Brennen Trust made a mistake. With a man named Jord Baker. You've been given some preliminary theoretical data on the concept of interstellar travel. The RNA injections and subliminal instruction—"

Aha!

"—have also stored inside you everything Jord Baker knew. When testing time comes, you'll be remembering things you never learned before. You'll probably remember things right now as I talk. This is just about the only way to bring them to the surface to be refiled in other parts of your mind.

"Jord Baker was a test pilot for the Brennen Trust. He was testing out the concept of teleportation when he decided to kill himself. Let me backtrack a bit.

"Ten years ago some scientist came up with a mathematically *provable* theory of fourth-dimensional travel. Two years ago the Brennen Trust's technicians, studying something completely different—nondestructive testing of ferrous alloys, I think—accidentally teleported a piece of steel three meters. It appeared in midair, which was fortunate because the resulting small explosion killed only one man—which was unfortunate because that man was the inventor of the process. It didn't matter, though, because we've improved on the device through experiments at Colony Four.

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"We finally built a small ship that could teleport itself. And the method requires no receiving station. It's not *really* teleportation, but a dimensional concept. I don't have a drawing scrim, but imagine a line. Every point on that line can be reached from a two-dimensional plane without having to go through any other points on that line. Similarly, any point on a plane can be reached from the third dimension without passing through any other point on the plane. The same holds true for reaching any point in space from the fourth dimension.

"Now, neither I nor Jord nor you can handle the math involved in Valliardi's Proof—that scientist I was telling you about—but Jord could push the right buttons. He made the test, traveling from lunar orbit to about a million kilometers from Jupiter in an instant. Well, it was an instant for him but for us he was gone for over half an hour. And then it was another half hour before we received his laser signal."

She brushed her fingers across the black coil of hair wrapped around her neck. "Think of it. He vanished for thirty-nine minutes to us but it seemed instantaneous to him. Remember the stories you read—well, at least Jord read them—about how traveling close to the speed of light leads to contractions of time? Take a couple of years' ship time to travel to Alpha Centauri while the rest of the universe ages a dozen? Well, here you could go to the same place just like that—" she snapped her fingers, "—and the universe would be four years older. And you could go to the center of the galaxy just as fast—for you. The rest of the universe will have aged thirty thousand years.

"Think of it. A one-way time machine. Make the slightest miscalculation and *poof!* you're a hundred years into the future, all your friends dead and no way to get back but to press the button again and lose another hundred years or whatever in an instant."

"I don't have any friends," said Virgil, beginning to cry.

"Oh, no. I'm sorry." She stroked his head gently. "It's time you had a bath."

* * *

She won't do it. She can't. What do I know about things like that? Virgil lifted his head and then dropped it back to the cushions. He had gone along with the exercises and the solid foods. Hated one, liked the other. He had been getting a lot of sun, building up to it in the three weeks since he left Duolab. He did his exercises on the top of the Brennen Trust Building, which was located, he discovered, in downtown Houston. Every half an hour or so he watched the thin trail of vapor reach up from the south—another launch from Velasco Liftpoint.

The lessons and tests that Dee and others had been giving to him had been surprisingly easy. He knew more than the simple calculus given him in college and it all seemed to come to him at the moment he needed it.

Pilot a spaceship? I'd be a man in the can, really. Just put in the

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coordinates they give me and punch one button. And if I put in the wrong coordinates, I appear in something solid maybe, and kapow! Like an atom bomb. He smiled.

"It's today, Virgil."

He turned. Doublé stood in the door of the access shaft. *Death Angel's hair stays calm in the wind, still trying to strangle her throat. Stupid. Hair can't strangle by itself. Her gray jumpsuit ruffles loosely, her eyes squint in the sun. Lovely Death Angel. I know you work for Nightsheet. No matter. I prefer Nightsheet to Master Snoop. But to end them both. . . .*

"The test? I'm ready?"

"As ready as you'll ever be."

She's right. The roar is almost gone. I can crack all ciphers I hear. I've almost gotten to her code too. Funny. I can break the code on a computer and know what it means when it buzzes and clicks to me but I can't break its cipher. It's the exact opposite with people.

"All right. Big question—" He wiped a handful of hair from his eyes. "Why me? Why someone locked up in a Duolab for a dozen years? And don't make it seem like you do it every day. I know what you had to do to Jord's body to get the RNA after he killed himself. The fall must have mashed him up a bit but you must have turned him to strawberry jam to get that stuff."

Dee looked at him, considering. "Let's go inside."

The lift descended. "We picked you because Jord was well-balanced mentally and without a hint of alternate reality premises. When a man most people would call normal just ups and kills himself—after a period of total silence on his return—something's wrong. Jord never attempted a suicide in his life. Never even thought about it."

"That's not true. He—no, wait. Never mind." Virgil shook his head. *It's like having someone else inside my head. I remember bare, vague snatches of things that aren't mine.*

"Anyway, we picked you because you've tried to commit suicide several times but never succeeded for some reason. You may last long enough to give us some idea of what's wrong with the device. You don't have any RNA memory of what happened on Jord's flight, do you?"

"No. He either blanked it out or it was too recent an event."

"Our floor." They stepped out into the hallway. Velasco lay only a short flyer-hop south.

* * *

The Brennen Trust executive shuttle looked tiny compared to the freightcraft towering a kilometer or so away from the personal spacecraft field. The stubby rocket pointed straight up, already in liftoff position and awaiting Virgil's arrival. The gantry lift ride lasted less than a minute. The entrance hatch hung open three meters from the blunt nose of the ship, less than forty meters from the ground.

Liftoff and orbital insertion went smoothly. Virgil grinned strangely during liftoff and the period of maximum dynamic pressure. He had asked for—and gotten—a seat by the only porthole available for viewing. He talked pleasantly with

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the passenger who had been bumped from the seat. The balding, business-suited man was an accountant on his way to Colony Six for a three-week vacation. He would be staying at the Sheraton Lagrange. They talked economics and praxeology until a buzzer announced their arrival at Trans World Spaceline's terminal. Virgil had not looked out the window once during the flight.

The trip to the experimental ship had to be made by "taxi"—not much more than a tank of hydrogen with seats. Virgil sat between the pilot and the man who would put him into the spacecraft.

Stupid. It's not really a spaceship but a dimension ship. Attitude jets, yeah, and emergency thrusters, but it's mostly just a needle that finds where two pieces of universe fabric touch and then pushes itself through. And I've got a secret.

The earth hung five thousand kilometers over their heads for a moment, then shifted suddenly to their side as the pilot rolled to align them with the attitude of the test ship. It was unbelievably small. Virgil knew that it was only ten meters long and five wide. It seemed like a toy, only slightly larger than a family flyer.

They want me to go to Saturn in that! Death Angel serves Nightsheet well. This will kill me for sure. But I've got a secret. He fingered the crumpled piece of paper jammed into the third finger of his right glove and smiled. He watched the blues and whites of Earth glitter, reflected from the stubby, wedge-shaped device.

The pilot waited in the taxi, trying to pick up jabber on a shortwave. Virgil noticed the antenna trailing behind them. Security had been surprisingly lax. Frank Workman, the assistant, explained.

"It's pretty crowded out here. Act innocent, play dumb, and everybody is too busy to notice you. MYOB holds up here as much as down there. Maybe more. Up here you watch your step with nature and with men. It's a long drop."

TWS's terminal shone unevenly about a hundred kilometers away. Virgil climbed inside the tight, cramped compartment and fastened himself into position. Circuits completed, the ship came to life. The small screen before him glowed.

"Hello, Virgil. They signaled me when you got there. The computer is getting its instructions right now."

"Hi," he said. *Death Angel's voice sounds strange in my helmet. Frank closes down the hatch and bangs on it twice. I wish there were people Nightsheet would spare. Air hisses in slowly. Now let's see if I can get those coordinates out of there.*

"Something wrong with your glove?" *She looks downward, probably at her own screen. It looks like she's gazing right at my hands.*

"No, just nervous." *Got it.* He palmed the paper and held it. *They'll be watching me all the while I'm here. Any attempt to change the coordinates and I'm cut off at once. But when I'm out in Saturn's orbit, it's over an hour before I even appear—relative to their perceptions. No, wait. An hour for me to get there—in their time, but only an instant to me; another hour for them to get my laser—which I fire*

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in the few minutes near Saturn I take to put in the new coordinates; followed shortly by me. No time for me to get there, none to come back—but an hour of their time each way. It'll be as if I'm totally out of their control. I could race my laser signal back and almost win. Come in second, at least.

So. Give myself a few minutes to program my own return coordinates. They'll get a laser message in teleport plus two hours—their time—saying that I made it to Saturn. A few moments later they hear that Duolab has blown up in a blinding fireball. Master Snoop wiped out once and for all. That's been the hard part—deciding between Master Snoop and Nightsheet. You knew where Master Snoop was but Death Angel was only a clue to Nightsheet's whereabouts. And beside, Master Snoop never let me go free and so they're guiltier.

That's her code! Or part of it. I'm helping Nightsheet take Master Snoop. Maybe then he won't take me. Stupid—he's a winner, takes all. Even Death Angel, someday.

"Prepare for—uh, we never did find the right word for this. Transdimensional insertion is a bit wordy. Good luck, Virgil. I'll see you in about two hours, twenty-seven minutes. It'll be only a few minutes for you. I don't think the travel time will bother you."

"Goodbye, Death Angel." Before she could frown, he pressed the glowing "Transfer" button.

It was *supposed* to be instantaneous but it felt nothing like an instant. The tiny space in which he sat seemed to shrink even smaller. *The roar—it's returning. No—different somehow. My legs! Hands. I can't hear myself scream. Hard to breathe. Nightsheet, you fooled me. Tricked me with threats of murder. Blackness closes in, walls hyperbollix in and outward. My eyes! Stupid—I fell for it. Corridor: black on black. Can't breathe. Hear my blood not flowing, feel my heart not beating. The corridor stretches. I've never gone this far before! They've always pulled me out. Out of the snow, out of the rocks and the granite, out of the water, out of the glass, out of the brick and pavement, out of the crushed steel and burning plastic. No one to pull me out now.*

Death Angel, you seduced me too well. I was stupid, stupid. End of the corridor. You! Nightsheet took you and made you an agent. No, Mother, I won't be calm. Yes, I know it's soothing. I'm soothed, but I don't want to go! Yes, I see the meadows and Susan and the hill and Dad and the time I found the puppy. I don't know. You win. You all win. It's soothing. But I wanted to—

I can see myself lying there in a half-open spacesuit. Stupid—there aren't any mirrors. It's like they said. I'm really going and I'm not sorry. I go. I'm calm. Restful. No.

No!

A band of yellow-white stretched before him. Below it, Saturn shone, gibbous. It drifted away from him ever so slowly. As predicted, he had retained his intrinsic velocity and direction. He sat still, quiet, breathing shallowly.

So that was it. Jord Baker couldn't abandon the ecstasy of

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death. But I can. The transfer may seem instantaneous to cesium clocks and quantum mechanics but the mind is the last thing left before the transfer is total. Maybe that's it. Maybe not. Maybe it's a form of death with rebirth thrown in.

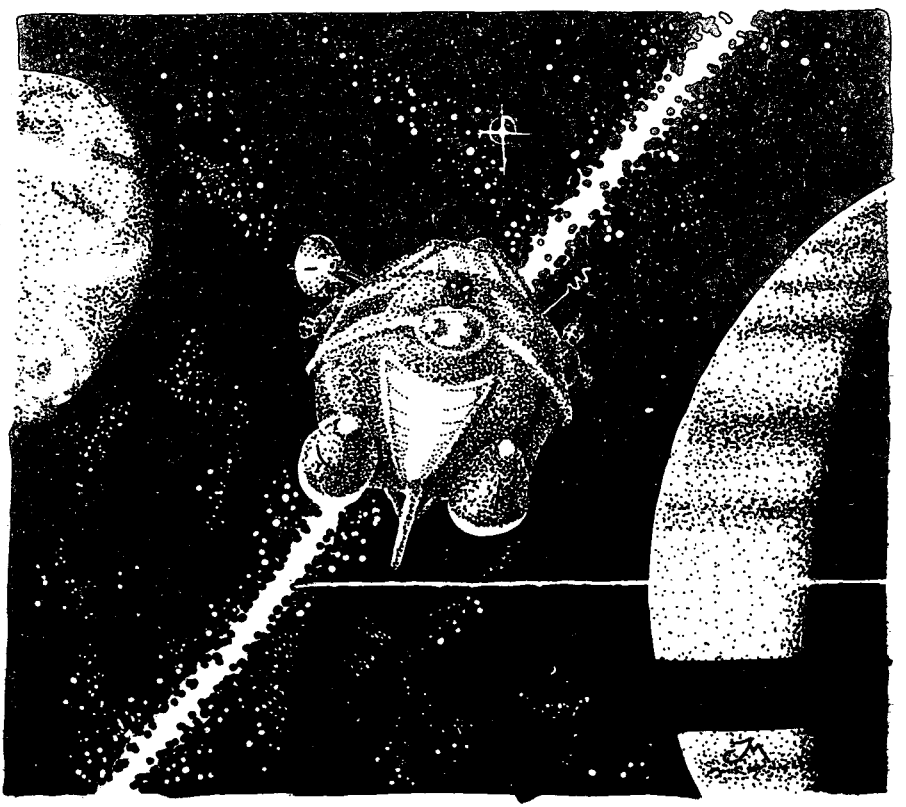
Virgil's hand trembled; then it grew firm as he reached up and grasped the laser locking-switch. It took several minutes to find the earth. His left hand let go of the still-crumpled piece of paper. It floated, ignored, and wedged behind the seat. Virgil switched the laser on.

You lose, Nightsheet. And I bet you'll lose on the return trip. And the other trips I'll be making. And you, Master Snoop, how can you keep an eye on me when I can outrace you? I've won! Finally.

"This is Virgil Grissom Kinney calling Brennen Trust. All systems are functioning normal. Am returning on your prearranged coordinates. Have information on death of Jord Baker. End transmission."

He pushed the "Message Repeat" button and waited a few moments before reaching toward the "Transfer" button.

I'll be with you in a short while, Diehla. I've cracked the code. ☆



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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Paul Walker

The Plague Dogs, by Richard Adams. Illustrated by A. Wainwright. Allen Lane, Penguin Books, in association with Rex Collings. London, 1977. 461 pp. £4.50 net

The Art of Science Fiction, by Frank Kelly Freas. The Donning Co., Norfolk, Va., 1977. 120 pp. $7.95

In the Ocean of Night, by Gregory Benford. The Dial Press/James Wade, New York, 1977. 333 pp. $8.95

Galactic Dreamers: Science Fiction as Visionary Literature, edited by Robert Silverberg. Random House, New York, 1977. 275 pp. $8.95

The Future Now: Saving Tomorrow, edited by Robert Hoskins. Fawcett, Greenwich, Conn., 1977. 286 pp. $1.75

Tabby: I say, old chap, what are you reading?

Tom: Richard Adams' new novel. It's all about cruelty to animals.

Tabby: A noble theme, I must say.

Tom: Yes, indeed. It's the story of these two dogs—

Tabby: Dogs? Did you say . . . dogs?

Tom: Yes. Would you care to read it when I've finished?

Tabby: No, thank you. I can't abide ethnic novels.

RICHARD ADAMS' *The Plague Dogs* is a complete mess. One of the few books I have read that I can say with confidence should never have been published as it stands. There is one good story in it, an article, and a couple of essays, but as a novel it is so much slush and slop.

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Its theme is man's inhumanity to animal. Its locale is the rugged Lake country of Wordsworth. There, amid natural beauty, is an animal-research station in which the most unnatural horrors are performed.

The heroes are a large black dog named Rowf and a small terrier called Snitter, who often speaks in verse. Rowf's contribution to modern science consists of being drowned repeatedly in a metal tank to prove that domesticated animals have greater survival potential than wild ones. Snitter's is to have his brains scrambled surgically to study the effects of obscuring subjective and objective perception.

Needless to say, the dogs are unhappy. Rowf has never known any other masters than the "white coats," but Snitter has, and he would like to find another. The two escape. They find themselves friendless and starving. They kill a sheep. The local people will surely hunt them down.

But they acquire an ally, a "tod" (a fox, to us furriners), who teaches them how to survive in order to keep himself well-fed on mutton.

Nevertheless, theirs is not to be an idyllic life in the wild. The stories of the two marauding dogs that steal chickens and kill sheep, and the involvement of a government agency, attract the attention of an unscrupulous tabloid publisher who sends in his most unscrupulous reporter, Digby Driver, to do what he can to embarrass the government.

The research station refuses to admit the dogs are theirs. Digby delves. He learns that one of the laboratories was doing research on bubonic-plague germs and that all of the germ-carrying fleas cannot be accounted for. He knows perfectly well the dogs were not exposed to them but he sees the yellow-journalism possibilities of the story; and so he begins to wage a campaign for the government to take action against the dogs. A campaign that is wholly successful.

The tale of the two dogs and their struggle to survive is interspersed then with the story of Digby and his victims, many of whom are victimizers themselves: the scientists, the parliamentarians, the locals good and bad.

The only valid story is that of the dogs. They are, up to a point, the most interesting characters in the book. Unfortunately, Adams writes a hundred pages beyond that point. Everyone else in the novel is less a character than a bias, upon whose head Adams heaps either affection or scorn.

But even our sympathy for the dogs is strained by the pointlessness of their situation. Adams wants us to be moved by their plight and indignant toward their persecutors, but their escape from the station removes them from the arena of both. We get repeated scenes of the doctors discussing the experiments, but then we are returned to the fields, where the dogs' problems are considerably different.

The cold-bloodedness of the scientists is depicted as subtly as a blowtorch, and as for the locals, who are not much kinder, their indifference to the strays and their hostility to them as sheep-killers are understandable.

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The advent of Digby Driver is completely extraneous to Adams' theme as well. Driver is a kind of dark *deus ex machina* who carries the plot off in a not-very-interesting direction. The results of his fallacious stories and the subsequent involvement of parliamentary types take the story from the slime to the ridiculous.

Nor are the pages and pages of travelogue prose about the Lake country, although well-written, any asset to the theme. The novel could have been set anywhere.

The truth is that the whole mess never amounts to anything, either thematically or dramatically. The dogs go nowhere. The local people, who it seems to me could have tracked them down easily enough had they tried, never try. The political aspects finally result in a calling out of the army, which is put to rout by another *deus ex machina* so contrived and anticlimactic that it destroys whatever small drama the end may have had.

Somehow Adams might still have gotten away with it had he kept to a single-minded point of view and pursued it ruthlessly: the dogs as the good guys and everybody else as a pack of rotters. But he tries to be fair. Rather than showing the terrible suffering of laboratory animals, he debates the subject among a variety of characters, each of whom makes a brief speech on some aspect of the problem of animal abuse. And then disappears.

Adams realizes there is no simple answer to the problem of who should decide whether an animal experiment is scientifically justified or not. He hates them all, but he is willing to accept those performed in an effort to eliminate disease. On the rest he is unclear, and so the theme is unclear.

Consequently *The Plague Dogs* is a 460-page hodgepodge of Adams-against-the-world, which amounts to neither an effective polemic nor an effective novel.

Freas' Friezes

All I know about art is that I know what I like, which is to say, I don't know much about art. And to make things worse, my favorite artists are Norman Rockwell and Andrew Wyeth. Despite these dubious credentials, I will not hesitate to say that Frank Kelly Freas' *The Art of Science Fiction* is the best science-fiction book of the year and one of the greatest books of science fiction ever published.

I have been admiring Freas' work for over twenty years. I used to buy *Astounding* and *Analog* just to look at his illos. And when I stopped buying them, I still browsed through every issue at the newsstand. My reaction then is the same as it is today: *O-o-o-o, Ahhhhh, Wow!* And for the unheard-of price of $7.95(!) anyone can now own his own Freas collection. That has to be the best buy I have ever seen in my life, and if you have ever *O-o-o-o-ed* or *Ahhh-ed* or *Wow-ed* at a Freas and you miss your chance to get this, you are a fringe fan.

The address is: The Donning Company, 253 West Bute St., Norfolk, Virginia 23510.

There are two other editions available: a hard-cover for $12.95, and an autographed limited edition,

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slip-cased, gold-embossed, and wrapped in a real cow, for $29.95.

I do not usually wax so commercial in my book reviews, but I have perused this tall, slim volume at least a dozen times and each time found something new to delight in or to wonder at. A few may be put off by the fannish style of Freas' commentary but I found it pleasant and informative, without arrogance or pretentiousness. The man seems to be almost as charming as his art. I say "almost," because nothing could be better than that.

I do disagree with some of the things he says. While I obviously admire him as an artist, I have never understood him as an illustrator. My idea of an illustrator's job is best said by Freas himself: "The best illustration does much more than simply present an incident from a story in visual form. It may indeed present such an incident, but it also captures a mood, a spirit, an idea, which is a proper and vital part of the story but which is, for one reason or another, not expressible in words."

The key to my disagreement is in the word "proper." Proper to whom? And who says so? I have rarely, if ever, thought Freas' illustrations were "proper" to anything but Freas' art. For "proper" in the proper sense as it relates to illustrating a work of fiction means rendering the writer's idea in accord with the writer's imagination. That is, seeing the scene as the writer sees it himself.

The trouble with Freas is that his talent and ability are so far greater than most of the writers he has illustrated—his vision so superior, so uniquely his own—that rather than complementing and illuminating the stories, his illustrations contradict them and intrude on them. They seem sometimes a broad parody of them. It is only when they are seen out of context, for their own sake, that their merit can be appreciated.

In fairness, Asimov and Clement are quoted in the book saying the opposite about the illos Freas did for their stories.

My second disagreement is that Freas is not a *science-fiction* artist at all, but an artist of romantic fantasy. As, I must add, was his idol and mentor, John W. Campbell. Some of the best fantasy appeared in his hard science-fiction magazine.

I can best illustrate the difference by saying that Chesley Bonestell *was* a science-fiction artist. In Bonestell, the *fact* of the landscape was the point of the work. In Freas, it is only a beginning. Freas, like Campbell, looked for the wonder in and beyond the facts. Facts in themselves were never sufficient for wonder, as they are to the truly hard scientific imagination. It was the possibilities inherent in the facts, the play of ideas for its own sake, that made the Campbell imagination so influential.

And it is that same playfulness with facts that makes Freas so much fun.

I should add here that Freas' playfulness is one of the most important elements of his greatness—a quality that most major science-fiction writers lack. Freas rarely takes his tongue out of his cheek, and more often than not his works

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laugh out loud, not only at themselves but at science fiction itself. By the use of humor Freas is able to overcome the mind's natural resistance to accepting plausible impossibilities and to bring to his most outlandish vision a sense of earthy reality.

The earthiness is there in the faces: those staring, mocking, quizzical, pain-filled faces, worn by hard work and hard times, with thick wrinkles and sensual mouths; broad-shouldered men with thick biceps; or withered old men, sered by long experience. Not the faces one would ever imagine the men of the future wearing. Hardly intellectual faces. Hardly the physiques of sedentary men. More like farmers and truck drivers and factory workers.

And the women. Hell, I hate to say it, but they're not much good for anything but bedding. Big-bosomed mannikins. Characterless, eternally passive, masochistic.

In his depiction of women, such as the one for "The Telzey Toy," we find the only time he achieves vulgarity.

As I said, Norman Rockwell is one of my favorite artists and I like him for many of the same reasons I like Freas. There is instant communication. Instant and effective. I know precisely what both men are trying to say and I feel it and I care about it. But while Rockwell is better at his best than Freas is, he is not quite as honest.

In Rockwell there is always one excessive, and excessively cute, detail that the picture would have been better without. Usually a dog or an especially cloying child, In Freas the excessive detail is usually a spaceship. Or two or three, flying in formation. But they are never cute. And while they limit the quality of the picture, they do not ruin it in the way Rockwell's excesses so often ruin his.

Finally—oh, well, why go on? This will probably be the first rave review in literary history to infuriate the recipient of its praise. I can't help that. I do not write for writers, but for readers. And, dear reader, if you never take another of my recommendations, *please* take this one: Get a copy of FKF's *The Art of Science Fiction*. You may never own a better science-fiction book.

Zen BEMs

Halfway through Gregory Benford's *In the Ocean of Night* I had a vivid recollection of an article I read years ago. It was a technical study of a group of men whose job it was to sit before radar screens in darkened rooms day in and day out for weeks at a time. It was found that their senses became so benumbed by the boredom that when a blip finally did appear, they did not respond to it. While reading this novel, I had at least two similar experiences, for when something dramatic finally did occur, I was so benumbed by all the words that had gone before that it took me two pages to realize that I had missed something.

In the Ocean of Night is that most dreadful of literary phenomena: the well-written novel. That is, a book whose well-written-ness overwhelms everything else within it; whose prose has so much more distinction than anything

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else in it that one is led to think the prose itself is what the book is about.

Benford must have put a lot of time and effort into it. The protagonists' neuroses are laboriously detailed. The backgrounds of earth, the moon, and the interior of the alien ships are elaborate and atmospheric. In fact, the scientific and sociological details are the best things in the book, consistently intelligent and frequently wondrous. But the brooding atmosphere that pervades everything, while occasionally effective, is ultimately tedious.

And then there are the words, words, words.

In 1999 the asteroid Icarus suddenly begins to act like a comet. Its orbit is altered. It imperils the earth. Two men are sent out to destroy it. The hero, Nigel Walmsley, an English astronaut working for NASA, discovers that the asteroid/comet is really a spaceship left by ancient alien explorers. He resists commands to blow it up, attempting instead to salvage whatever technology it offers in the hope that it will solve the terrible mess man has made of the world.

End of Part I.

At this point Benford had my interest. What would happen next? Could Nigel preserve the secrets of the aliens and still save the earth in time?

Unfortunately, Benford was uninterested in the question.

Part II begins years later. Everything is over, and we are given the details in a few paragraphs. Nigel is now involved in a triangular love affair with two women, one of whom is dying of pollution disease. Besides this, he is working at the JPL Labs in California, trying to solve the mystery of a strange extraterrestrial manifestation that seems to be moving in our direction. And besides this, the manifestation itself is an alien craft in search of life.

What had started out to seem a combination of *Lucifer's Hammer* and *Rendevous with Rama* now seemed to become a combination of *The Mote in God's Eye* and *Love Story*. But . . . no. After an interminably leisurely buildup of the three plot lines toward another climax, Part III begins, and Benford is off in yet another direction. This time he's on the moon.

Nigel has a new girlfriend. She discovers another alien ship on the moon. She and Nigel are soon hard at work trying to decipher its mysteries, one of which may save humanity from extermination by hostile alien gadgets. Meanwhile, on earth, a Japanese scientist living in a cabin in the wilderness finds a man half-dead in the snow. The man, who claims to have just escaped from a tribe of Bigfootians, is carrying a remarkable weapon which the Japanese realizes is of alien manufacture.

Once again the various plot lines work tortuously toward still another climax, which turns out to be just as ambiguous as the other two.

In the end, however, all is resolved. And it turns out that what Benford wants the novel to be about is the resolution of Nigel's spiritual alienation, which is accomplished, as it usually is these days, with the hero freakier than he ever was before.

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I hesitate to call the novel "turgid," although it is, for it is not so much over-written, although it is, as overconceived. There is just too much in it, and most of it is so irrelevant to what is most interesting in it that the real drama is buried alive.

Of course this is a patchwork novel, comprised of three stories from *IF*, *F&SF*, and a Silverberg anthology—which explains much but excuses nothing. A novel is about what is most interesting about it; and in Benford's case, his aliens are more interesting than anything else. The characters, while they are carefully drawn and frequently come to life, are no match for the events in which they are involved. But Benford refuses to accept this. He keeps taking us away from the aliens in order to show us the physical and spiritual plight of the world of which, I assume, his hero is the epitome. The people are occasionally interesting but no match for the mythic wonder of the aliens.

What is worse is that in patching the novel together, Benford should have realized he had three large climaxes to deal with and no way to escape them gracefully. The effect of a stunted climax is a kind of literary constipation that leaves the reader first bewildered and then bored.

And Benford compounds the problem with refusing to develop even small climaxes. On page 242, the end of Chapter Three finds Nigel and his girlfriend in possession of a very exciting piece of evidence as to the possible appearance of the aliens. As Chapter Four opens, the reader is chomping the bit to know more. But what he gets is: "Mr. Inchino stood at the small sink and slowly washed the dishes after supper."

And that is the end of the alien artifact except as it is mentioned later in conversation. And don't think that Benford is being cagey in switching our attention at the moment of suspense, for moments are all there are; and the book is filled with long paragraphs of menial action such as we see Mr. Inchino perform. You know—"He walked to the door. He opened the door. He entered the room. He closed the door."

All of these faults add up to a very boring book. Yet I would not be at all surprised to find it nominated for a Nebula. After all, it is so well-written.

A Silverberger with Hoskins Sauce

Someday I am going to write a book about the great unsung heroes of science fiction: the anthologists. Don't laugh. Oh, I know most knowledgeable people regard the anthology as a fast, easy way for an enterprising writer to make a buck and nothing more. But without them my own reading would have been a lot poorer. A good anthologist is like a good friend whose opinion you trust. It is a sharing of enthusiasms. You may not agree with all of the editor's choices—you may even violently disagree with half of them—but if the ones you like make as great an impression on you as they did on him, you learn to trust him.

Two anthologists I have come to trust are Robert Silverberg and Robert Hoskins.

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Despite the portentous subtitle, "Science Fiction as Visionary Literature," *Galactic Dreamers* is a grand bag of eight stories, only one of which I violently disagree with. It begins with James Blish's extraordinary "Common Time" and includes J.G. Ballard's intriguing "The Waiting Grounds" and Cordwainer Smith's brilliant "The Dead Lady of Clown Town."

Others included are a typically ingenious Jack Vance collage called "The New Prime" and John W. Campbell's devastating "Night"; an R.A. Lafferty ("Sky") that, frankly, went over my head but left me grinning with pleasure nevertheless; a curiously old-fashioned (for him) story by Brian Aldiss called "Incentive"; and Silverberg's own "Breckenridge and the Continuum," about which my mother has told me to say nothing at all.

Silverberg states his theme best: "As a reader, I am most excited by the kind of science fiction that offers consciousness-expanding views of wondrous reaches of space and time—fiction that creates myths about the future."

Hoskins likewise has a drum to beat. His anthology purports to show science-fiction stories concerned with "saving the future."

As a friend of mine used to say: *She-e-et.*

I strongly suspect that the reason why nine out of ten anthologies have such introductions is a deep feeling of guilt within the editors—as within almost everyone connected with science fiction after a certain age—over the fact that they are involved in an adolescent activity. I wish I could say I felt otherwise. Sometimes I do. But science fiction, like any other genre, perhaps like any other activity, has its limits. The passion for it, usually born in adolescence, does not last forever. I still like science fiction but I no longer love it, as is the case with more than one science-fiction writer. Their problem is: They can't admit it.

But the truth of it is, you don't have to love a thing to do it well. And sometimes not loving it helps you to do the thing better.

Robert Hoskins is the former editor of Lancer Books, and a terror he was. But those, like me, who liked him at all, liked him very much. So it came as no surprise to me after he left Lancer to find him editing a series of first-rate anthologies. *The Future Now* is the latest of them, and for $1.75 it is a good buy.

There are Fred Pohl's marvelous "The Merchants of Venus" and Dean R. Koontz's effective "A Season for Freedom" and Barry N. Malzberg's (in my opinion) best story, "Final War"; and Poul Anderson's "Home," Harlan Ellison's "Silent in Gehenna," Silverberg's "The Wind and the Rain," Bill Pronzini's "Our Times," Isaac Asimov's "All the Troubles in the World" and Hoskins' own "The Mountain," plus a curiousity by Ursula K. Le Guin called "The Stalin in the Soul," Ed Bryant's "Shark" and Virginia Kidd's "Flowering Season."

I can tell you this: The name of Silverberg or Hoskins on an anthology guarantees that you'll get your money's worth. ★

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DIRECTIONS

Dear J.J.,

Since I've written my *Galaxy* article on *Star Wars*, I've seen numerous reviews in just about every imaginable place. Some are genuinely instructive and thoughtful, while others run from the sublime ("Did you know that 'Star War' backwards is 'Raw Rats?') to the incorrect. Among the latter are several assertions that Chewbacca is straight out of *Planet of the Apes*. In view of the widespread interest in Chewbacca and the other characters, I'd like to add something to my article. Now, George Lucas was indeed having fun evoking a wide range of old science fiction and fantasy films, but the key to the nature of the second mate of the *Millenium Falcon* lies in a parallel with *The Wizard of Oz*, not the *Planet of the Apes*. Physically, he is furry—but in everything else, including his facial features and inarticulate snarlings, he is very un-Planet-of-the-Apes-like.

The leading characters are on a sort of Yellow Brick Road trek. C-3PO is a tin man who lacks a heart at the beginning, always thinking only of himself, but who ends up with a compassionate nature and such feelings for his fellow robot that he volunteers gears and circuits to save his friend. Hans Solo comes from a jungle of vicious creatures where he may be a type of king due to his innate attributes, but is a cowardly figure none the less. In the course of reaching the journey's end, he displays unexpected courage, including the rout of Imperial Stormtroopers by stampeding them with a show of ferocity, and ending with his joining battle to save his friends.

Found in a symbolic cornfield, Luke Skywalker is unable to think for himself or formulate plans for the future, but like the Scarecrow soon starts displaying originality of mind, working out a plan to rescue the Princess and finally how best to destroy Death Star. Chewie is Toto, an inarticulate hairy beast that displays great devotion and does as he is told by his master. Also, I'm sure everyone has noticed, he is a great hit with the movie audience—because like a cute dog, he is so lovable. Hans Solo alternately pets or kicks him.

The Princess may be a girl, but is a tough customer like Dorothy who, you will recall, killed two wicked witches. Dropped a house on one and melted the other. (Darth Vader better watch out, come *Star Wars II*!) Obi-Wan Kenobi is the embodiment of Glinda the Good's magical guidance along the Yellow Brick Road. R2-D2 has no parallel, as far as I can see, unless it's a tenuous one with the Mouse Queen. However, there is no mistaking the final scene in the great Palace where awards are handed out—and the metal man is resplendant in fresh plating and burnishing.

Having seen *Star Wars* again since writing my article, I remain convinced that the movie is more complex than generally realized, since there are several levels of understanding required to achieve a full comprehension of what George Lucas was doing. And to an-

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swer in brief what seems to be the major point of the relatively few adverse reviews, if indeed *Star Wars* is childish on one level, it is not that way on others nor is it unidimensional in the least.

Jay Kay Klein

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Bridgeport, N.Y., 13030

Of course, some critics have already seen allusions to The Triumph of the Will *in the closing scene of* Star Wars. *But even they don't notice the sort of things* you *mention. Meanwhile, back in Hollywood, it's rip-off time:* Starship Invasions, Star Crash, Star Maidens. *Blecch!*

j.j.p.

Mr. Baen;

Some comments, if I may, on your September issue.

To put last things first, J. Flower's "Coming Home" seems to me to be very close to libel. I pride myself on being one of those who became a Democrat in the early 50's primarily because the then Vice President was a Republican. And I know the bounds of paranoia are difficult to set, BUT I have never been given any reason to believe that the man would ever do physical injury to his nation—even to regain control of it.

But that story was fairly typical of the "down-beat" feeling of the entire issue. Jerry Pournelle, in his article, told us a sweet fairy tale about how wonderful life could be if we will just turn all the decision-making processes over to the technologists. The rest of the issue, except for J.E.P.'s serial, told us what horrors confront us if we fail to follow his advice. The serial, on the other hand, tells us that the solution to our energy problem and conquest of the solar system will still leave us with an overpopulated world and massive unemployment unless we also find the new social and political institutions which will enable us to utilize this technological bounty. And this is the most depressing element in the issue; the man who professes to have the answers really offers us nothing but the same old balderdash warmed over on a nuclear fire and served up in a deep-space squeeze bulb.

Mr. Pournelle is an excellent writer and Dr. Pournelle is no doubt quite learned in the physical sciences. I am quite willing to concede the possibility of solar fusion power sources saving our necks in the long run, although I must say that I have yet to see any convincing evidence that controlled fusion is closer today than it was ten years ago. I am willing to accept the short-run solution of fission power—provided that someone will show me a system of waste disposal which has progressed beyond the "working paper" stage and is acceptable to the people who live next door to the dump. I am willing to accept coal (with scrubbers), methane, and alcohol as viable alternatives to petroleum and to accept their higher costs. I will even accept the environmental damage and the human damage inherent in current coal-mining technology—although I hope someone will find ways to minimize those costs. But I will not accept the destruction of democratic institutions, the imposition of eighteenth-century conceptions of justice, and the permanent "welfarization" of a major portion of our population by increasingly capital-intensive means of production without provision for worth-

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while employment of those who are not equipped to function in a capital-intensive economy. Dr. Pournelle must also deal with this human economic problem—the man or woman who is not fit to go into space, either cannot learn or has had no opportunity to learn the skills which are saleable in a high-technology society, or simply cannot compete in the highly individualistic society which he and Dr. Anderson hold up to us as the ideal. Unless you are prepared to institute some kind of eugenic—social extermination program, your society must provide for the weak as well as the strong, and the rights of all citizens must continue to be safeguarded. Like the attorney who is pictured as a silly—if not insane—weakling in Pournelle's story, I do not believe that the captain of a ship has the right to take risks with the lives of his passengers without giving them some voice in the matter and I do not believe that he has a right to sentence a man to a period of penal servitude without due process of law. In this story, the captain is a Solomon, and obviously the attempt to catch Ceres is not going to result in the death of our heroes (male and female) but all captains are not Solomons and all desperate risks do not succeed and the end *does not* justify the means.

I wish Dr. Pournelle and all of the other able scientists who are writing science fiction today would give some attention to problems which are other than technological. I have no doubt that technology can be found to replace our petroleum economy. I am not at all sure that we will find the new social, economic, and political institutions that are the minimum requirement for human survival in a world of exploding populations, rising expectations, and continuing displacement of human labor by machines.

This is overlong and not entirely coherent, I am sure. I haven't time to rewrite now and do not wish to delay sending it off. So here it is with bad typing, perhaps misspellings, and other flaws—of art and of logic, perhaps.

Spider Robinson was excellent, as usual. I especially liked his comments on Joanna Russ' "chip on the shoulder" attitude. I hate to see such a fine writer ruined by obsession with a "message." And I hate to see the movement for human liberation cluttered up with bitter sexist attacks from either side.

I liked Fabian's work, as always.

James Sanford Mead

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First: my story Exiles to Glory *assumes that there will NOT be continued investment in space and high technology; it examines what I think would be the consequences of the Carter energy program (which has no investments in new technology; and siphons off $40 billion or so annually for use in more welfare programs; the Carter "energy war" begins by disbanding the armored divisions of fusion research, and ends with huge taxes to be used to equalize income).*

In my judgment there are profits to be made in space, and there may well be attempts to exploit space despite government opposition to technology; that means a transfer of control from democratic institutions (if there are any in this world) to board rooms; flight of capital from the US to tax havens; and such. My story also assumes unlikely investment levels by private fortunes—else things would never have got even as far as they have in the world of Exiles.

Second: regarding nuclear wastes: if the entire WORLD were to operate exclusively on nuclear power, the accumulated wastes

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would, after 50,000 years, cover one square mile to a depth of about ten feet. We have many square miles of Mojave Desert not far from where I live. If there is no better way to handle wastes, solidify them, place them in the Mojave, build a "superdome" concrete structure above them, surround with chain link fence, and put up a sign that says "IF YOU GO OVER THIS FENCE, YOU WILL DIE."

Third: whether or not I approve of the actions of Captain Greiner in my story is irrelevant; the story says that such actions can happen. Frontier societies usually have institutions different from settled societies. One need not approve—or disapprove—of Frontier or Ship-board justice to write about what may be inevitable.

Fourth: I know of no rational proposal to send any great part of the population to space. I think it demonstrable that given space research and new energy sources there will be a very much larger pie to split here on Earth; and I think it fairly obvious that the wealthier the society, the more real freedoms its citizens enjoy. It is an economy of scarcity that creates rigid class lines, feudal institutions, and the like. Without abundant cheap energy, an economy of scarcity is inevitable; and that means regulations, bureaucracy, government, and lawyers, lawyers, lawyers.

Finally: I have never proposed turning over "all the decision-making processes" to the technologists. Indeed, on all referenda I know of, the voting public has overwhelmingly approved nuclear power and high technology options; it is "experts" such as Freeman of the Ford Foundation Energy Project (now a White House energy expert on public payroll) who terrify me, not the citizen body. The "experts" have produced a plan which guarantees scarcities; I think they are afraid of wealth, which creates real *freedoms—such as the freedom of a street sweeper to hike in THEIR High Sierra.*

—Jerry Pournelle

Dear Mr. Baen:

Confusion appears to exist over the distinction between "religious beliefs" and religious impulses." This seems to be because these terms, as we are using them, are not clearly defined.

"Religious impulses" and "religious beliefs" are not seperate entities. They are simply different parts of a single concept—"religious impulses" the first, and "religious beliefs" the second.

"Religious impulses," like territoriality and the sex-drive, came into being, as you say, "earlier in the sceme of things"—ergo, before man used tools, could speak, or had any conception of right and wrong. They were formed back during those dim times in the past before conscious human thought-process evolved. Therefore, obviously, they were "founded in ignorance".

But when people recognize "religious impulses," that is, admit they are motivated by them, they then become "religious beliefs."

The basic "religious impulse"—"religious belief" is to believe in "God."

"God" created heaven and Earth—the entire universe, all that exist. He therefore oversees and controls everything, including the people of this world.

Why do people believe this?

Because they are brought up in a culture that already believes it, and so educates them in it, conditions them to accept it.

This is why you believe in "God."

You would believe in Brahman, Allah, or follow the teachings of Gautama just as devotedly and incessantly, had you been brought up in India, the Middle-East, or China.

But what evidence have you that "God" exist?

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None.

You can only say that, during your entire life, you have heard other people talk of "God," or read what other people have written about "God."

Everyone, in fact, that professes "God" as real, can only offer this, and no more, in their defense of "God's" existence—what they have heard others say or what they have read that others have written, as, indeed, these latter people can only attribute their own beliefs in "God" to even older sayings and writings of yet *others*. —And so the process continues back through time.

This is not evidence; it is hearsay.

Now then. Science is based on knowledge obtained from observation of revelant phonemona. That is, scientists accept as true only what can be proved by material evidance.

In this way, science-fictionist are also supposed to conduct themselves—as implied by their commitments to follow the principles of science.

I find it very hypocritical for you, a science-fiction reader, writer, and editor as well, to blatantly and contemptiously come out and sat that the existance of "God" is automatically a fact and not just a belief.

I see no reason why it isn't a reasonable interpertaion of:

". . . . anyone who believes in the Old Testament . . . must consider himself as divinely instructed to . . . do all in his power to further the development of our space capabilities, and . . . he must resist and defy any person, process or philosphy that acts as a determinent to that goal."

to say:

"You instruct us to instigate subversion, insurrection, and revolution, commit criminal acts, engage in treason, or do anything necessary, if it serves to further the progress of humankind into space'."

Lee Smith

West Palm Beach, Fla.

And here I thought the South was all Bible Belt! Well, I don't think Jim needs any defense against the likes of you—or the likes of the religious fanatics you imagine you oppose.

j.j.p.

When is a chest pain a heart attack?

Often, determining the cause of a chest pain is difficult. So how can a doctor tell when it's a heart attack?

The American Heart Association is supporting research to help doctors identify heart attacks as early as possible.

One research method is the myocardial scintigram. It allows accurate diagnosis of heart damage without catheters, without the injection of dyes.

With it, doctors can actually look inside a patient's body to evaluate the heart's condition. If there is heart damage, the doctors can see exactly where — and how extensive — it is.

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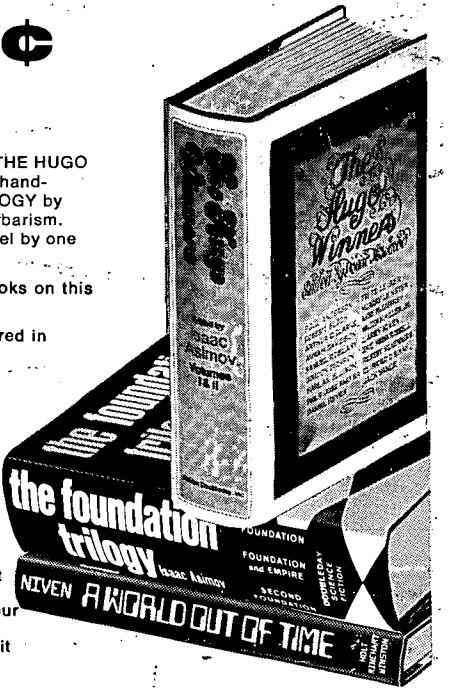

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